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THE BODLEY HEAD
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DY : : MCMXVIII





BY THE SAME AUTHOR

AUTUMN
EARTH
THE INDIVIDUAL
APRIL PANHASARD
HALF IN EARNEST
THE MAN WITH THE DOUBLE HEART

THE BEST IN LIFE

BY

MURIEL HINE
(MRS. SIDNEY COXON)

LONDON: JOHN LANE, THE BODLEY HEAD
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TO

GARRIT CANNON

AND

AGNES CANNON

MY AMERICAN FRIENDS,
AND, SINCE THIS BOOK WAS WRITTEN,
MY ALLIES

"For life, with all it yields of joy and woe,
And hope and fear . . .
Is just our chance o' the prize of learning love,
How love might be, hath been indeed, and is;
And that we hold thenceforth to the uttermost
Such prize, despite the envy of the world,
And, having gained truth, keep truth, that is all."

Robert Browning.

THE BEST IN LIFE

THE BEST IN LIFE

PART I

A DREAMER OF DREAMS

CHAPTER I

PRETTY Mrs. Serocold sat upright in the Empire chair, painfully conscious of a cushion adorned with a spray of blackberry leaves in raised gold tissue which pierced the chiffon veiling her plump white shoulders. She wished now she had not discarded the fur coat by her side, with its soft collar of chinchilla matching her grey velvet toque. Under her feet was a tabouret with the same prickly ornament. It slipped across the parquet floor at the slightest stir of her high-heeled boots.

The cushion and hassock emphasized the prevailing note of the *salon:* an elegance without comfort — that shallowest form of luxury.

For the Maison Clotilde knew its clients. They embodied the class of Society that worships the New and the Bizarre and "discovers" Genius by the process of referring to its market value.

Mrs. Serocold's restless eyes, of a rather indefinite hazel hue, darted across to a draped alcove, where a dressing-table with spindle legs upheld an elaborate three-fold mirror beneath a lustre with crystal drops, which glimmered down approvingly on cut glass bottles and toilet fittings.

She could catch a glimpse of her reflection: the henna-coloured glossy hair and delicately tinted cheeks which were a credit to her masseuse, smooth throat, full bosom and the long beautiful rope of pearls that rose and fell with every breath.

She smiled back unconsciously, greeting this familiar friend with an air of pleased patronage. Undoubtedly, she was "looking her best."

A movement on her companion's part broke up the absorbing vision.

"Well?" She turned her pointed chin in his direction, her eyes bright, and became aware of his discomfort and gloomy air of outraged patience.

"Nice thing you've let me in for!" His silence exploded into words. "If I'd known—" He stopped abruptly with a nervous glance across the room.

For "Clotilde" had reappeared, a tall *mannequin* in her wake, attired in the latest Paris fashion.

"I'm off!" He made an attempt to rise from the low gilded couch which recalled the picture of Madame Récamier and looked absurdly out of place beneath his lean muscular limbs in their khaki uniform.

"Ah, no! Do be good!" Mrs. Serocold waved him back caressingly. "I shan't be long. And then we'll go to that gallery and you shall explain the Bex cartoons. I really didn't mean to stay. But since I'm here—" She leaned sideways, pouting a little. "Besides I *hoped* you'd advise me. You've such wonderful taste in dress, and a man always knows what a woman should wear."

Clotilde, approaching, studied the pair out of her prominent clever eyes, shrewdly divining the soldier's *gêne* but anxious to satisfy her client.

"Monsieur perhaps finds the room too warm? After the trenches," she added, smiling. She was wondering if the young man helped with Madame's bills? One never knew! "Would Monsieur prefer a chair outside, on the balcony, where he could smoke? *Ça y est!*"

She signed to a girl hovering near, in a straight grey gown with the merest hint of uniform, and before the victim could protest a seat had been arranged for him.

"*Voilà!*" Clotilde beamed, triumphant, "Monsieur enjoys his cigarette and the good air, and yet sees all and advises Madame through the window. *Par ici, monsieur.*" She held back the elaborate curtains of taffeta, caught into draperies, daintily ruched, by little knots of golden apples.

"Oh—thanks!" He made his escape, relieved to be out of the scented room but angry as a creature trapped. He saw at once to his defences. "Better have this shut, I think? Wind's in the east." Determinedly he closed

the window after him, ignoring his lady's hurried protest.

Clotilde, wisely, made no attempt to foil this masculine manœuvre, and he sat down on the gilded chair cautiously, stretching his legs.

A cold wind fanned his face. He drank it in eagerly, blinking a little in the glare after the dim light within. The tall house lay in shadow above the narrow quiet street and, glancing back, he realized the advantages of his retreat.

Silhouetted against the light he could watch Mrs. Serocold, himself but an indistinct outline on the narrow stone balcony. For he still felt a man's discomfort at being the object of attention in a hive of femininity, an object, too, of restrained amusement!

"I'll pay Tory out for this." He dived for his cigarettes. "It's going just a bit too far. And she *said* it was only to leave a message!"

Meanwhile the lady anathematized had dismissed him serenely from her mind — shelved him, in fact, for further use — and returned to the business of the moment.

Through a fan-light above his head he could hear her high determined voice:

"It must be smart, and original, but not too *voyant* — you understand? To wear to *anything* in war-time!"

"*Parfaitement.*" Clotilde smiled. "All my ladies desire the same. Rosalie!" The *mannequin* stepped forward obediently. "This is one of our latest models. Madame observes —" She lifted up the hem of the short full skirt — "the little wire? But quite *pliant.* To hold it out — *so* graceful! *Ah non,* Madame! not a crinoline; though I hear —" Her voice sank to a whisper. "Or, of course, we could edge it round with fur?"

Mrs. Serocold shook her head.

"I don't think so. It's too late in the season for that; almost spring."

Clotilde smiled.

"*Au contraire, madame.* Fur is the rage, on all the new models. Even for summer gowns, I'm told. Fur, fur, a passion for fur! It's going to be introduced with muslins! So chic, the combination."

The man outside gave a scornful grunt.

"What rot!" He addressed his boots, subtle companions in misfortune. "I'd like them to try our goatskin coats, live in 'em day and night. They'd soon lose their 'passion for fur'!" He struck a match and, shielding it with hands scored by recent scars, lighted his cigarette and went on with his steady grumble, "I thought England had woken up. After eight months of war! But they don't know yet what it means. Still at the same silly game! Makes me sick to come back to this!"

The little outburst relieved his temper.

Within the temple sacred to dress, his lady had started her own battle. He recognized the shriller note of bargaining through the open fan-light.

"Impossible! It's much too high. *Thirty guineas?* I couldn't, really. I shouldn't feel it *right* in war-time, when we all have to economize."

"Ah — this war!" Clotilde shrugged her shoulders with an air of despair. "Who indeed does not feel it? It spells ruin for every one. Materials so costly now. And labour a cruel proposition. Ladies will not realize the difficulties facing us."

With a sidelong look at her client's face, pretty but hard, she changed her tactics.

"*Voyons, Madame,* we must arrange! I have other models, less expensive." She dismissed Rosalie airily. "*Va, mon enfant.* Tell Isoël to put on the 'putty' cloth — the coat and skirt from Jacques Noyau."

As the girl left the room, Clotilde unbent to her customer.

"For an old and valued client, perhaps, we can make a little *déduction;* although it is the latest model. But between ourselves? Not to be mentioned?"

Mrs. Serocold nodded gaily.

"Of course not. I understand. And then when this horrid war is past and we're all of us rich again —"

She left the sentence incomplete with a laugh that was shallow as herself.

Clotilde's full lips tightened. She did not share in the belief that Peace would mean the Millennium; that the changed world would swing back to its old careless prosperity. But her voice was suave as she replied,

"*Assurément!* Meanwhile Madame will find a smart

tailor-made more practical just now. In Paris they wear little else."

A flicker of feeling passed over her face, with its thick white skin, lightly powdered. A keen observer would have guessed that it was born of patriotism. For the costly models Clotilde showed were made entirely for foreign trade and not for the vanity of the nation. France had early found herself. By a strange turn of the wheel of fate the race accused of Latin "lightness" had risen to the supreme heights of individual sacrifice.

"Ah now, what's this?" Mrs. Serocold looked eager as the folding doors opened wide and a fresh *mannequin* entered the room.

She moved with a faint swing of the hips unusual in an Englishwoman. The heavy pleats of the "putty" skirt showed to advantage high-arched feet with rounded ankles, neat and slim. She walked superbly, her head high.

"Jove, that's a stepper!" thought the man at the balcony, roused from his absorption, "And what a figure!" He stared through the glass aware of a sudden check to his boredom.

"Will coats be as short as that?" Mrs. Serocold sounded suspicious. "And is there a bodice underneath?"

"Yes, in one. A three-piece gown. Isoël, show Madame!"

With a graceful movement the *mannequin* slipped her arms out of the sleeves and disclosed the upper part of the frock, semi-transparent and low at the throat.

"Now isn't that perfect?" Clotilde enthused. "So nice for Bridge or a little lunch; even the theatre at a pinch. For people are not dressing now; just wearing these transparencies." She smoothed back the lace at the neck.

"With a short skirt?" The client frowned. Clotilde's eyes swept down to the elegant boots on the stool.

"*Mais certainement!* What could Madame desire more providential? With Madame's feet!"

A smile curved the *mannequin's* lips. She raised her heavy-lidded eyes to note the result of the flattering speech.

The man in the balcony leaned forward. He had just decided she was too pale, colourless, with her smooth fair hair, the hue of honey in the comb, despite the fine arched brows and lashes which looked black by contrast. For those eyes were the keynote to her beauty: Jewish eyes, passionate, deep, with the brooding wonder that underlies the glance of a persecuted race.

"What an unusual type," he thought, drawing his chair closer still to the long pane of plate-glass.

At the grating sound the girl's dark eyes swept the window. Surprised in turn, a warm colour stole into her cheeks; her lips parted; between them he glimpsed a row of even, dazzling teeth. The youthful picture was complete.

Now, at a gesture from Clotilde, she walked slowly across the room, exhibiting the lines of the gown. The man watched her, fascinated; that faint sensuous sway of the hips, the cold mouth and passionate eyes.

Her hands fell limply to her sides with long slim fingers; her shoulders drooped. An air of languor suggesting the East weighed upon her like a spell. Yet the creamy texture of her skin and the honey-coloured heavy hair, drawn boldly back from her face and piled high with a dull green comb, were surely a legacy from the West.

As she wheeled round he had time to note a little pink ear, from which there swung a pear-shaped drop in palest jade, and the fine modelling of her throat. The fashion at the moment forbade any attempt at a fringe, but permitted a curl on either cheek to atone for its severity.

This absurdity suited the girl, with her smooth young forehead and arched brows, which gave her a faintly mocking look, as though she questioned the world's opinion.

"Isoël"—a Jewish name?

Across the man's vague conjectures Mrs. Serocold's shrill voice broke.

"I should like to try on that coat, if I may?"

A little stir followed the speech. Mrs. Serocold, preening herself before the mirror, expressed approval.

"With a black hat?" Clotilde mused. "And one of the new fur collars. It needs that—the finishing touch!

Just a narrow band of skunk, fastened with a velvet rose. *Pervenche* blue, the latest shade. Anna!" She called the girl in grey. "Tell Delphine she will be wanted. And to bring down the Virot toque, the black one with the aigrette. Also—"

Mrs. Serocold interposed:

"What would be the price of the gown?" She was not to be hurried off her feet into fresh extravagance.

"I will see, Madame. I am not sure. It only came in yesterday. It is undoubtedly Madame's dress, designed for her, both colour and style!"

She went out with her noiseless step which had something almost feline in it, despite her full solid figure with the Gallic bosom and tight-bound hips. A hush fell on the long room where the *mannequin* stood, easily posed, smoothing the pleats of the graceful skirt.

Mrs. Serocold dreaded silence. She broke it condescendingly.

"You like wearing pretty things?" She studied the girl's aloof young face.

"Yes, Madame. When they suit me." Her voice was low and musical. A faint foreign accent lay in the carefully spoken English words.

Mrs. Serocold noticed it.

"You're French, aren't you?" she hazarded.

"Partly, Madame. That is to say my mother was Niçoise." Her eyelids drooped.

"Ah, that dear sunny South!" The lady gave a little sigh. "How I've missed it this hateful winter; with the fogs and the horrible dark streets."

A pause followed the complaint. Then the girl raised her head.

"This war has made a difference. Does Madame think we are going to win?"

"Of course!" The customer looked shocked. "Why ever not? You can't doubt it?"

The *mannequin* seemed to hesitate as though she were weighing the pros and cons.

"No, Madame," she said at last. "Not in the end. But when will that be? Who can tell?" She shrugged her shoulders.

"It will be over in a year." The lady spoke with

authority. "Quite over—a case of starvation. Even now they feel the pinch—are short of food and of forage. Besides I have private information. I am not allowed to tell you more but a cousin of mine who's married a man whose uncle's in the Cabinet, and who of course knows *everything,* is very firm upon the point."

"I see, Madame. It is interesting." Isoël's lips betrayed no smile but demure mischief lurked in her eyes. "Madame is fortunate indeed to know exactly what goes on. With us"—she threw out her slender hands: a gesture of futility—"we wait and hope and read the papers and wonder why nothing happens. It is, perhaps, a test of faith?"

The man outside smiled grimly.

Mrs. Serocold stared at the girl, vaguely annoyed by her attitude. She was one of a class of woman dismayed by the state of war without a true realization of what it involved. She looked on it as a personal grievance, disturbing the tenor of her days, and as far as possible ignored it unless she had gossip to impart or a grievance against the Government.

Now she felt her serenity threatened by the cynical attitude of a "shop-girl."

"Of course," she spoke rather coldly, "it wouldn't do to let every one into our military secrets. But I don't mind informing you"—she lowered her voice mysteriously—"that certain developments are expected shortly in the Dardanelles. Turkey is bound to crumple up once we threaten Constantinople, and then with the 'Russian steam-roller' we shall see great things in the Balkans. I hear already that Priz—Chim—you know, that place one can't pronounce—may fall at any moment now. What a blow it will be for the Kaiser!" She leaned back in her chair and smiled, pursuing the pleasing train of thought. "I wonder what we shall do with him?"

"When we take him?" suggested the girl.

Mrs. Serocold, rudely roused from dreams of Elba and Napoleon and the Kaiser pacing the lonely isle in eagled helmet and fierce moustache, gave the sceptic an angry glance.

"I'm afraid you're rather pessimistic." Her manner was tinged with insolence. "I suppose I'm too *British*

to feel a doubt. But I thought that the French were equally staunch and confident in the result?"

Isoël's pale cheeks warmed. She resented the implication.

"Undoubtedly, madame. They strive to ensure it. With *all* their men at the Front." She laid a quiet stress on the words. "But I am partly British too, through my father, and if I fear at times, it is not because I mistrust the army — *ma foi, non!* — but the people at home."

"Really? That's very interesting. In what way?"

Mrs. Serocold's hazel eyes wandered down over the girl contemptuously. Secretly she felt annoyed to discover no flaw in the beautiful figure. What right had a Clotilde *mannequin* to that subtle air of dignity?

Unperturbed by the other's frown, Isoël took up the challenge.

"I think we are not awake yet — not all of us — to the *needs* of the War. Madame will excuse my saying there is too much amusement still in London. We have passed too quick from the first alarm. It is, perhaps, because we are rich and the suffering has not begun." Her mouth hardened. "But it will come."

"Not begun!" The fair client drew herself up indignantly. "And what about our poor wounded?"

"Ah!" said the girl. "*They* know. I was talking of Society."

She turned her head, aware, too late, that Clotilde stood upon the threshold, her face full of amazed displeasure.

"Isoël!" Her voice was sharp. "You are wanted in the fitting room. You can leave the coat."

The girl moved off, biting her lip but her head high. Anna met her in the passage.

"*You'll* catch it! Madame heard. Your tongue, my child, will be your ruin. Better keep clear of Monsieur too. He seems to have got his knife into you!"

Meanwhile Mrs. Serocold, fully aware that the *mannequin* would reap the reward of what she called the "impudence of the lower classes," was drinking in a heady dose of flattery at Clotilde's hands.

"And how the colour suits Madame! But Madame

can wear *anything. Mon Dieu!* it is a pleasure to dress a lady with Madame's figure. Ah, here comes the black toque. See how it light. up Madame's hair? Yes — a little on one side." She stood back and clasped her hands. "And the fur, Delphine? The skunk collar? Madame observes how the dark note throws up her delicate complexion? So warm too — with these cold east winds. Madame is like a Kirchner picture. She should be painted. Just — so!"

Deftly she pinned a knot of blue periwinkles below the throat and lowered her voice mysteriously.

"I am going to make Madame a price that I could not to any other lady. Twenty-five guineas! A three-piece gown! From a new model which cost me forty! But not a word to Madame's friends. With cloth a miracle to obtain! Still, for an old customer — even in war-time — one does one's best. The hat? Ah, the hat is another matter. But perhaps Madame has an aigrette?"

Mrs. Serocold, carried away by this breathless flow, peered in the glass, yielding to the spell of "suggestion." She fingered the fur beneath her chin, conscious of its pleasant warmth.

The husky foreign voice went on.

"A tailor-made in the early spring is *always* an economy. No doubt Madame would like to call Monsieur on the balcony to see the effect of the hat and coat?" She glanced backwards at the window.

She could catch the outline of the soldier, now on his feet, bending down over the narrow iron rail, absorbed in some detail of the traffic.

"No — not yet. Wait a minute!"

Mrs. Serocold's voice was sharp. She did not wish to be interrupted and Clotilde smiled to herself. It settled one question in her mind. Delphine, obedient to a gesture, threw a veil over the hat and knotted the ends with deft precision.

"Yes. I like it," said the lady.

Outside, in the street, a newsboy's voice rose shrill and breathless, calling the names of the papers.

The man above scanned the head-lines on the fluttering sheet as the urchin passed.

"Disaster in the Dardanelles. Loss of British Battleships."

He had just time to spell out "H. M. S. Ocean" in heavy type before the lad swung round the corner.

His face was grim with anxiety. He pushed back the French window and stepped quickly into the room.

Mrs. Serocold, surprised, glanced up at the apparition.

"I've nearly done. Just wait a minute."

He interrupted the flow of excuses.

"I'm going out to get a paper. There's bad news — of Ernest's ship." He strode across the slippery floor, indifferent to her annoyed protest.

"But you're coming back?"

"Afraid I can't," he turned at the door impatiently. "I'm sorry, Tory, but you see Mabs will want me, if it's true. Gone down in the Narrows — the *Ocean!* You understand?"

"Yes, of course. You poor boy! Still —" She stopped as the door slammed and gave vent to her annoyance: "Oh, this war! What a nuisance it is! One can't settle to anything. Yes, I think I'll take the hat. Black too," her voice was pettish. "It's wiser, isn't it, just now? I live in *hourly* dread of mourning!"

CHAPTER II

IN a house overlooking the approach to one of London's big stations, a girl sat by the fading light busily trimming a straw hat.

Beneath, the trains rumbled past, shaking the long untidy room where a pair of shabby iron beds seemed to have wandered by mistake, in contrast to the lofty walls, with ornate moulded cornices and a vast mirror, that rose to the ceiling, between the deep-set Georgian windows.

For the house had seen better days, and the room which Isoël Dark and her friend now rented for a trifling sum had in olden times been qualified by the stately title of "Reception."

Gone were its massive gilded chairs, its carpet vivid from the loom, its chandelier of lustrous glass reflecting the lights of the wax candles; gone all its magnificence and yet about the old room hung a certain air of dignity.

With the growth of the railroad traffic and the huge station and hotel, the house had sunk to the common fate of streets that hem in a terminus.

Starting on its downward course as a boarding-house, it was now debased to humble lodgings in which the rooms were let to pairs of married workers or to single women who could boast the qualification "respectable."

But the mirror survived the years of change; and the fine old gilt, grimed by the soot cast up by the hurrying trains, glimmered dully here and there from arabesques of carved wood, topped by a Cupid — one arm broken —clasping a cornucopia.

Isoël Dark loved this mirror. Here she could play to her heart's content that deathless game of "make-believe," which is the refuge and resource of loneliness plus imagination.

She loved, too, the noisy trains which jarred on her companion's nerves, the more material London girl with

her shrewd wit and love of pleasure. Isoël would creep from bed on tiptoe, whilst the other slept, and crouching down on the window-seat lift the edge of the dingy blind, to peer out through the night for the shower of sparks amidst the smoke from the iron horses as they sped in their headlong gallop to the coast.

Here, to her, was the gateway of life: the first plunge from the drab wet streets into the green world beyond. With straining eyes, she would picture herself borne along in that maddening rush down to the far off belt of shore; drink in the salt breath of the waves and the dimly remembered tarry smell of harbours and clustered shipping.

Sometimes these waking dreams were so vivid that she could feel the swell of the steamer beneath her feet as she set sail for the land of adventure; France, the Midi, her mother's home, and, farther still, Italy with the deeper blue of the southern skies; palaces in lace-like marble, gay dark faces and pattering tongues.

Travel moved her as nothing else. It stirred in her blood, a legacy of centuries that had run their course from the days when Drake's drum was heard throbbing down the western breeze to those when a modern English queen showed the world how a woman could rule. And ever a Dark had cut adrift from his family and shore delights obedient to the call of the sea.

Gervase Dark had been the last. The fair record was blotted now by the stain of his treachery to the Service his fathers had helped to build.

Nevertheless Isoël's pride wove about him a chain of romance. Drunkard and gambler, he yet had been a hero in her childish eyes, a glimpse into another world.

Her mother had fostered the delusion.

Court-martialed and dismissed the Navy when the loss of his ship drew all eyes to the fact of his secret vice of intemperance, Captain Dark had drifted about the Continent, a social outcast, finally to run aground in the magical harbour of Monte Carlo.

There he took unto himself a second devil more potent still, and gambled away recklessly the savings of his prosperous years.

As his resources slowly ebbed, so his manner of living

changed until at last he found himself in a sordid hotel at Monaco. It was kept by an aged French Jew, a widower with an orphaned grandchild; and here in this squalid setting love stole into the outcast's life.

Miriam, little more than a slave in the frugal establishment, but young and eager, full of romance, with her beautiful pleading Jewish eyes, saw in this derelict of fortune a hero and a gentleman.

The pitiful story held but one end. After a year of secret passion, her own disgrace synchronized with a desperate run of ill-luck at the tables completing her lover's ruin.

The old Jew, furious when this double disaster reached his ears, aware that credit was overdue and that scandal threatened his own household, pinned down the guilty pair to an immediate marriage.

He had realized that a man like Dark, lacking all normal strength of resistance when money was loose in his pockets, but by no means a villain at heart, could be managed by a skilful hold upon the supplies that fed his vices. Meanwhile unconsciously his guest had increased the trade of the house. Obviously of gentle birth, gay, gregarious in his cups, he supplied the right atmosphere to attract customers to the bar. Sailors from the little port found him excellent company and the clientele had moved up a step in degree since his arrival.

Dark, in spite of his weaknesses, might yet prove a useful asset, always provided that he earned sufficient to warrant his support; earned, that is, his food and lodging, with an occasional dole of coin, in return for the little halo he cast of gentility round the Jew's household.

It is doubtful if the old man's guile and constant threats would have achieved unaided the result he sought; but Dark was genuinely in love.

His money was gone with his reputation. Here at least was a home open with an adoring and beautiful girl who never upbraided but subtly coaxed and to whom he owed reparation. Although at times he shrank aghast from the thought of a definite legal tie with a class so far removed from his own and all the traditions of his boyhood, his weakened stamina clutched at the chance of support without the effort of work. Three

months before Isoël's birth the pair became man and wife and Gervase Dark entered upon another stage of his downward career.

The Jew kept him short of cash and, little by little, driven on by the Furies that pursued the man, he sank to the post of serving himself the customers who thronged the bar and of washing the glasses in return for a weekly wage and the feverish joy of a stolen night at the Casino.

Then at the last gasp of his pride a miracle happened, setting him free. A letter reached him, long delayed, announcing an unexpected windfall. Cunningly he guarded the secret, afraid of the avaricious *patron*.

His daughter was then ten years old, fair-skinned as himself with her faded mother's beautiful eyes. She was the only link that held the Englishman to Monaco. For a week he wavered; then one day disappeared, leaving no trace of his destination or his plans save a brief line of farewell to his wife, promising money later on and bidding her make no search but believe that his absence was for the best.

On this hope she lived for a time, daily expecting his return, nursing her aged grandfather, threatened with a second stroke, and assuming command of the business with the thrifty patience of her race.

The Jew died, one hot June night, and on the day of his burial Miriam received a letter enclosing notes for one hundred pounds.

Beyond the fact of its London postmark, no clue was afforded her as to her husband's whereabouts; merely a line in the well-known hand: "Bank this. For you and the child."

Faithfully she fulfilled his wish. Here was an unexpected *dot* for Isoël, now growing fast, with the promise of unusual beauty.

Miriam, aware of this, stirred by old-time memories of the husband so deeply loved, roused herself from the lethargy into which she had sunk of late.

The knowledge that Dark was still alive, in his own country and affluent, nerved her to part with the hotel to the first client who bid for it; and armed with the profits, she and her child started forth in the fond pur-

suit of a worthless man who yet had won the undying love of wife and daughter.

French cousins in Soho took in the lonely pair and from thence the long search began, doomed to endless disappointment.

Their slender resources slipped away but they found work in the Quarter and lived not unhappily, buoyed by a sense of expectation which never at least failed the mother. The old streak of romance which had cast her into the sailor's arms became more vivid with middle-age, and she trusted blindly to some strange chance which should bring her face to face one day with the lover of her girlhood.

Hand in hand with the pretty child she would haunt the Park and the well-known streets, those wistful glowing eyes of hers scanning the faces of men who passed.

With the passionate loyalty of her class she brought up Isoël to believe in the man who had ruined her own life, to remember that she was gently born and must live as befitted an "English lady."

The idea became at last an obsession. She saw in this straight slim girl of hers, with her honey-coloured luxuriant hair, a princess in disguise — the end to her own fairy story!

Some day Isoël would meet her parent on a social plane far removed from that of her birth. She must be prepared for this event.

Time, which had silvered her glossy hair and added weight to her full figure, wove about Miriam the spell of mystery in her quest.

People befriended the mother and child. At the dressmaker's where both worked, the girl's refined manner and taste attracted an elderly customer, a lady who, bereaved herself, found solace in Catholic charities. She made inquiries through the priest and learned the whole pitiful story. After a long interview with Miriam she offered to take the daughter into her own household as "sewing maid," at the same time to see that the girl's education was continued under her own roof.

Here was a chance too good to miss. Sadly the pair separated, and Isoël went to Chester Square leaving her mother in Soho.

Lady Manister, divining the sharp pain of the parting, allowed the latter many opportunities of visiting her protégée. But Miriam held back. Pride, and the course she had mapped out for the daughter of Gervase Dark, made her hesitate to recall the girl to her old squalid surroundings.

Isoël was for "better things," destined to marry and "marry well." She drove this into the girl's young mind with reiteration and fond advice.

Still she haunted the West End streets in the intervals she snatched from work, spending her Sundays religiously amidst the gay throng in the Park. Sometimes she would catch from her seat in the front row near Hyde Park Corner a glimpse of Lady Manister, strolling past with Isoël carrying her cloak and books. For in the course of three years the protégée had superseded the old maid — now pensioned off — and become the right hand of her mistress. "Maid-companion" she styled herself, faithfully copying the ways of Lady Manister and her friends, fired with all her parent's ambition.

Led, albeit unconsciously, by an inherited strain of refinement — the old instincts of the Darks — the parody was not overdone except upon rare occasions. Then the first great grief of her life fell upon her. Her mother died leaving her a legacy of a hundred pounds — the *dot*, untouched — and a last wistful admonition to live as befitted her "father's daughter."

Two months later her patroness went the way of all flesh; suddenly, and with no instructions for the furtherance of her charities.

With the double shock heavy upon her, Isoël, now nineteen, cast about for fresh employment and again fortune favoured her.

Her perfect figure and fine carriage had attracted the notice of Clotilde on the occasions when the former had attended her mistress to various fittings. It secured her a post in the busy house as *mannequin* and the chance she sought to study again at close quarters the class she was learning to imitate.

Nothing escaped her watchful eyes. She saw the world as in a mirror, smiling for her, dancing past and beckoning to "follow, follow!" out on that pathway of

adventure which led to the heights of her ambition: marriage with some "fairy prince."

In the seclusion of the room which she shared with Patty Stephens — a friend of the old Soho days, employed in a manicure department — with the aid of the lofty glass, she rehearsed her part, a born actress!

She lived in this world of "make believe," with the friendly old mirror casting back the play of her fine slender limbs, the gay, tossed head, and sparkling eyes. With the dingy chequered counterpane caught up from her iron bed and pinned securely to her shoulders, she would make her bow to Royalty; or, draped in it, "imagine" a tea-gown and entertain her fairy prince with the latest gossip of the town; listen, demure, to his advances or check his ardour with a frown.

Sometimes, too, she would dance, glancing over her rounded shoulder to watch the lightness of her step and the swing of her short shabby skirt; fully aware of her pretty ankles and the well-shaped arms, firm and white, with their tapering fingers that lightly touched, in imagination, her partner's shoulder.

Patty would watch her, interested but slightly scornful.

"There you go! Why can't you come to some hops with me and dance with a real live man?"

But Isoël would shake her head.

"No, thanks — not with shop-boys." Cold disdain would sound in her voice, "I prefer to keep to my own class."

Patty would laugh good-humouredly, aware of the *mannequin's* ambitions.

"Well, don't trust too far to it; or you'll get badly left one day."

Now as she sat in the fading light trimming a new straw hat with some flowers which had survived one season, Patty glanced up at the clock with a puckered brow, realizing that her friend was late in returning home.

She admired Isoël immensely. Although she affected to despise the upper classes, secretly she was flattered by the thought that this girl of gentler birth than herself should seek her out as a house-mate.

But, apart from this, some maternal instinct lay at

the base of the friendship. Her own shrewder knowledge of life and the hardships of the daily struggle had made her old before her time, sharp-tongued and self-defensive. Her womanly instincts, hitherto cramped, felt the need of expansion. She divined in her companion a certain strain of recklessness and the need of a restraining hand.

Isoël was doomed to success. But how? By what devious paths? She required Patty's common sense to balance her flights of imagination.

Aware of her friend's proud ambition, Patty foresaw that the time might come when Isoël's curious beauty and charm might lay her open to grave temptation. By no means a prude, enjoying pleasure with the frank zest of the Londoner, her own morals were based less on religion than on the experience she had gained. It taught her that girls who succumbed to what she called "shady ways" slowly sank out of sight into lower grades of misery.

From this she swore to guard her friend, her protective instincts on the alert; unaware that it called out the highest good in herself.

Now, as she sat in the window-seat, pinning the crushed and faded wreath round the new spring hat, she glanced apprehensively at the clock. Isoël was unusually late. The thought irritated her.

Beneath, through the growing darkness, a train was being shunted noisily, emitting a heavy cloud of steam and then a long and piercing whistle.

"Shut up!" the girl grumbled. "It fair gets upon one's nerves. No peace, morning or night."

She stared through the open window. A smut sailed in serenely and settled on her freckled nose; a snub nose that looked good-tempered despite the fiery red of her hair and a glint in the eyes with their sandy lashes. Absently she put up her hand and the smut became a sooty smear, licked her thimble and replaced it, her head a little on one side, criticizing her handiwork.

"Won't do! The bow's all wrong. Isoël would set it right in a second if she were here; give it somehow a smart twist. I wish she'd come. What can have kept her?"

Then she heard a quick step pattering up the stone stairs; the door opened and her friend swung gaily into the room.

Her cheeks were pink, her eyes shone; about her was an air of excitement, a subtle triumph that did not escape the watchful maiden by the window.

"Hallo! what's up? Have you been boxing Monsieur's ears?"

"Yes — metaphorically!" The word rolled glibly off her tongue. But for all her evident absorption in some secret victory Isoël did not forget to glance sideways at her friend, the mirror. "*Ciel!* but I look hot." She sank down on the nearest bed and pulled the pins out of her hat.

CHAPTER III

"WELL?" Patty's voice was impatient. "I suppose he's been up to his old tricks?"

"No." Her eyes still on the glass, Isoël was rearranging the little curls above her ears. She added with a mysterious smile, "And he's lost his last chance now."

Patty gave a little gasp of mingled excitement and dismay.

"Don't tell me you've got the sack!"

"Perhaps."

Isoël, thoughtfully, examined her hands, her face demure. It was part of the game. She did not intend to mar the effect of a thrilling story by pouring it out impulsively.

"Patty, you'll have to see to my nails. They're much too long for munition work!"

The elder girl, justly annoyed, threw down her hat and crossed the room. Leaning across the narrow bed she caught the culprit by the shoulders and gave her a determined shake.

"Don't go on in that foolish way! What's happened? I want to hear."

"There's no need to get excited. A mere case of tyranny and the 'worm turning.'" Isoël smiled maliciously with sombre eyes. "I was the worm — *bien entendu!* — the serpent in Monsieur's Garden of Eden. Heavens! I wish you'd seen his face. And all the other girls were there."

Releasing herself from Patty's hold she slipped off the bed and faced her audience.

"It was Rosalie's doing — the little sneak! She's always been jealous, from the start. Directly she saw that Monsieur admired me," her lips curled scornfully, "she tried to get me out of the place. As if I would stoop to flirt with him, an odious little wretch like that!"

"Oh, that's it," Patty whistled. "But what could she

do, beyond being a cat? I always thought you were settled there?"

"I wasn't quite so sure of that. At least not since the war began. Anna told me that she'd heard Madame discussing economies and a further reduction in the staff. Monsieur, it seems, agreed with her that two *mannequins* were sufficient. Madame wanted to keep me on, because of my figure," her hands went down to her slender waist with unconscious pride, "but Monsieur voted for Rosalie. Anna, of course, is a fixture; she's been there for nine years. But it's Monsieur who has the last word. Though he keeps discreetly in the background, the money's his. He's the God in the Car." She went on with growing scorn, "A nice fat, squat little god! With his puffy face and evil eyes."

Her friend nodded.

"I know; a beast! Like Gilders at our Stores. Can't let a girl alone, and if you cheek him he pays you out. But they couldn't dismiss you suddenly without some decent sort of excuse?"

"No, Rosalie saw to that. I'd been making an estimate out for Anna, and a spot of ink fell on the gown I was wearing, one of the new models. I hadn't noticed it at the time, it wasn't much, and by great luck it chose a place beneath a pleat. But Rosalie was on the watch. It was her turn to tidy up and instead of putting the gown away she carried it into Monsieur's room; said she 'considered it her duty.' So in he came blustering just as I was ready to leave. He's never forgiven me, I fancy, for that day last year when he tried to kiss me and I threatened to inform Madame." Her cheeks warmed at the memory. "Still, I kept quite cool until the end when he refused me my week's money on the plea of damage to the gown. You know we're fined for anything but rarely more than half-a-crown, and considering that I'd been dismissed he might have overlooked the matter. So then," she flung out her hands gaily "I offered him my little surprise."

"How? What?" Patty's eyes were full of the same light of battle.

"Ah!" Isoël drew in her breath. For a tantalizing moment she hugged her secret knowledge; then the mir-

ror, like a magnet, drew her gaze. "Wait! You must picture the scene. Anna was there with Delphine, and, beyond the screen where we dress, Rosalie, listening hard. Monsieur was smiling wickedly, the gown still flung across his arm, and I stood, facing him. Like this—" She peered into the glass and posed for her friend's benefit.

"Humble, *tu vois,* and apologetic. I knew that would make him tyrannical. If you let a man see you fear him, you rouse in him the bully's instincts. I was waiting until I heard the creak of the show-room door and knew that Madame was there hidden, all attention, and then—" Her face changed swiftly, the air of deference gave way to one of pride and sardonic humour, the well-shaped head was flung back, slim form drawn erect; she looked like an avenging goddess.

"I said—politely, you understand?—'Monsieur, you meet my own desires. I do not require my salary. It burns my fingers, your *German Gold!*"

Patty gazed.

"You never did? Oh, you *duck!*" She clapped her hands. "But was it true?"

"Yes, of course. That's what stunned him. The secret had been well kept; I found it out by the merest chance. He's not even naturalized! But he's always posed as a Frenchman. A pretty Frenchman, born in Hamburg! Ever since the Maison Drey has been wound up and both interned he's been living in a state of panic. Madame is French, Parisian, and the business passes for her own."

"What did he say?"

"He couldn't speak. His puffy face turned a sickly grey and he glared at me for a moment. Then of course he began to bluster. But I walked straight past him, kissed Anna and nodded to the scared Delphine, then turned, for a parting shot, at the door. This was for Rosalie. I'm glad now that I learned German!"

Here was another mystery.

"Why? What did you say to her?" Patty watched her friend, round-eyed.

"I thought it was kind," said Isoël, "to warn that poor innocent girl that her friendship with Monsieur

was dangerous, in war-time especially! The merest hint, you understand: '*Auf Wiedersehen, Fräulein.*' Madame probably guessed my meaning, she will keep an eye on Rosalie. I'm rather sorry for Clotilde. She works hard, while he exploits all her taste and her talent. He's mean, too, besides being faithless; as true a Hun as ever breathed! Ah, you should have seen his face. He won't forget Isoël Dark!"

She nodded grimly at the mirror; then, with a pirouette, she turned.

"No more slavery for me! Now I shall be my own mistress. That's what I meant by munition work."

"You'd never stand it," said Patty shrewdly. "It's too monotonous for you. Besides, with your looks, it's a waste. Leave it to the old and ugly who don't mind how they ruin their hands!" She viewed the matter professionally.

Isoël frowned.

"I'd like the work. I want to feel that I'm of use, offering my 'widow's mite.'"

She sat down on the edge of the bed. Absently she arranged her skirt and peered at her narrow, well-shod feet. For however shabby her dress might be she had the instincts of her race "*Bien gantée, bien chaussée*" had been her dead mother's maxim.

Patty, watching her, smiled to herself. Here was no candidate for "labour"! She went back to her argument.

"You'd get sick of it in a week! And then there's no turning back. Once you're in the Government's hands you become an automatic machine. They certainly pour in pennies fast, but expect in return its equivalent. No slacking is allowed; you go on till the works wear out! Of course it's a nice idea — doing one's bit — but not for *you*. You're not built for it, my dear."

"It's what my father would have done."

"Not he!" was Patty's thought. Wisely she kept it to herself, aware of the mixture of pride and shame hanging over the name of Dark. At times she envied her companion's superior birth, yet was fortified by the knowledge that her own people, though of humbler origin, were "straight-living."

Isoël, conscious of the silence, went on rather quickly: "I've been thinking about it for some time. It's not at all a new idea. I used to hear the clients boast of all they were 'doing for the War,' their charities and 'self-denials,' "—she laughed with the old touch of scorn "and it made me mad, their hypocrisy! They'd give a guinea to some fund and meanwhile order costly gowns, with unpaid bills mounting up—simply spending for love of show! I like to feel I can hold my own with any of them and *do* more. If it comes to a question of choosing between us, I'm as well-born as most of them and I *know* I have a better figure." She drew herself up, superbly conscious. "Why should I take a lower place? Be patronized and turned about like a wooden doll while they stare at me as if I existed for their pleasure? Haven't I a soul as well?" She threw out her hands with a vivid gesture. "But one day they shall see!"

Patty nodded, carried away by the personality of the rebel. Then she glanced up at the clock.

"Good heavens! Is that the time? I'm going out with Bert to-night, a hop at the Claverton Rooms. Isoël, be a dear and just finish off this hat." She gathered up the forlorn object. "And I'll get the supper things. There's more ribbon if you need it."

"More?" The younger girl frowned. "You poor dear. It's all trimming. *Must* I use these battered flowers?"

Patty glanced at them wistfully.

"They're a nice colour, don't you think? It's to go with my green voile frock. I thought it would brighten it up a bit. Still, have it your own way." But she sighed as she went to the cupboard.

"Trimming should be like a smile on a face, a mere expression," Isoël preached. "Never a set hideous grin defacing all the other features. Now, look! If I turn up the brim and catch it here and wind the ribbon quite simply round the crown with a big bow like a butterfly just settling on a flower, you get design, instead of chaos! *There*—isn't that far better?"

Patty put down the plates with a clatter.

"Y—es." Her voice betrayed doubt. "Doesn't it look a bit dowdy? Seems to me to want colour."

"And what about your pretty hair?" Isoël stooped to flattery. "To fling pink roses on to flames is not a hat but a holocaust!"

Her laugh rang gaily through the room.

"Put it on!" She held out her work of art with a last deft twist to the bow. "Now, isn't that truly chic? It might have been made by Delphine."

Indeed in some mysterious way the hat had changed beneath her touch to a thing of grace, with simple lines and yet distinctive, emphasizing the fiery hair of the wearer and casting a slight shadow across the high cheek-boned freckled face.

"Bert — whoever he is — will like it."

Patty nodded.

"He's got good taste. He's a traveller for Miles and Gough. You should just see him dance the Tango!"

They sat down to their frugal meal.

"Won't you come with us to-night? I hate leaving you all alone; and Bert would find you heaps of partners. It would cheer you up, a bit of a fling."

Isoël, smiling, shook her head. The other gave an impatient sigh.

"Not good enough, I suppose?"

"I'd rather stay quietly here. I want to think out my plans. I can't afford to remain idle; but I shan't look for work till Monday."

"No, though you've got something behind you. Lord, I'd like to be in your shoes and swank about my hundred pounds!" Patty spoke with simple envy.

"My *dot?* Heavens! I couldn't touch that." Faint horror was in her voice. She had all the *bourgeois* superstition on the sanctity of its purpose. She fell into a reverie.

Patty over her cup of cocoa laughed rather maliciously.

"But, if you marry a rich man, what's a hundred pounds to him?"

Isoël came back with a start to present conditions: the coarse cloth, chipped plates, stale bread, flanked by a thin slice of cheese, a jam pot and the saucepan used for brewing the muddy cocoa.

The sordid facts dispelled her dream but could not diminish her ambition.

"It will come in for my trousseau, of course."

"Oh, you infant!" Patty giggled, then glanced anxiously at the clock. "Ten minutes to get dressed. You might give my shoes a rub? I'll do the same for you some day."

"Of course I will. Why, the lace is broken! Knotted too. Have you a new one? You can't go out in that state."

"Can't I?" Patty retorted. "It would take more than that, my child, to keep me away from a dance! I'm not as pernickety as you. If I can't get the best in life, I make up with the second-best."

. . . . . .

Long after her friend's departure Isoël recalled the speech and turned it over in her mind.

Chilled by the bare, draughty room, she realized that she was lonely.

Was it wiser, as Patty preached, to settle down in the narrow groove of the little manicurist's class, enjoying those pleasures that came her way, than to aspire to those above her, choking down the impulse of youth?

A picture of Bert rose before her — a grotesque travesty of the men she had seen at Lady Manister's house — cheerful, uncouth, familiar, with hot hands that clutched her waist as they swung together in the dance.

"Never!" Isoël recoiled as though the phantom she evoked had materialized in the dying embers. She clung anew to the great adventure, claiming from life its superlative gift. Patty's homely philosophy was a compromise with happiness.

The best, the finest or — nothing at all! The gambler's blood in her veins stirred at the thought of the high stakes. She would pin her faith on one wild throw.

She moved across to the window and opened it wide. Down the line, lights were glimmering through the dark, red and green, on the signal posts. A long train with sleeping cars stole past, shaking the room as it gathered speed, and she leaned far out watching the sparks that spangled the smoke.

It vanished swiftly into the night and an odd sensation came to the girl that she was parting with a friend, a lover bound for another world.

Wistfully she stretched out her arms, feeling the soft drops of rain patter down on her bare wrists, the wind riot in her hair.

"I'm coming," she whispered. "Wait for me!"

As if in answer, from afar, a low clear whistle echoed back, sweet with the promise of adventure.

CHAPTER IV

LONDON, ashamed of a frosty dawn that had laid fairy fingers across the grimy streets and shivering trees, powdering them with a silvery hoar, relapsed prosaically into fog.

It added a further note of depression to that induced by the Sabbath in the half empty thoroughfares with their shuttered shops and air of sleep, heavy as though induced by a drug.

Isoël had been out to Mass, returning to find Patty in bed, reading a tattered novelette, her hair screwed up in waving-pins and capped by a dingy woollen shawl, sign-manual of a cold.

To her polite inquiries the patient responded dolefully:

"Yes. And if it goes to my chest the theatre's off to-morrow night! It isn't often that Bert gets seats and I'd been looking forward to it. But you know what they are at the Stores. If one of us so much as looks at one's pocket-handkerchief, they make an eternal fuss—say the customers don't like it! And life's so dull with this old war, one wants a bit of livening up." Her grumble seemed to do her good for she went on, with a chuckle, "Been to Church and got it over? You look ripe for fresh mischief!"

For the raw morning had tinged her friend's cheeks with a delicate colour. Little drops of moisture clung to her close-fitting velvet hat, beneath which her smooth fair hair shone with the lustre of old metal. Her dark eyes were glowing with life as she took off her overcoat and shook it out before the fire.

"I've had an adventure coming home."

"Heavens! At this hour in the morning. I suppose you got lost in the fog?"

"Yes. It came on suddenly, midway from Our Lady's, and I wandered into one of those squares beyond the station, I don't know which. I had to feel along the railings and nearly fell down an area where

the gate was standing open. Stepping back, I put my foot on something soft and picked it up."

"A purse?" Patty looked excited.

"No, it was a letter-case. Would you like to see it?" Her eyes twinkled. She knew Patty's pet weakness, overpowering curiosity, and went on teasingly, "I didn't wait to examine it, as there was a loafer hanging about and I thought he might snatch it in the fog. It feels bulky, *full of notes!*" She produced it from an inner pocket in the damp and discarded garment. "I think we'll look at it after breakfast."

"No, now!" said Patty sharply. "Bring it here, I can't see it."

Isoël turned it over in the firelight pensively. There came a stir from the bed, the littered clothes were flung back and a plump leg shot out, the foot feeling for the floor.

"Lie still! I'll show it you. You'll only make your cold worse."

Isoël crossed the room and forced the patient down in bed.

"That's the worst of red hair. Always means a creature of impulse!" But she tucked the check counterpane tenderly round her friend. "Now." She sank upon her knees by the side of the bed and disclosed the trophy.

It was in worn crocodile skin with battered corners of silver gilt, handsome still, despite hard service and its bulging pockets which spoiled the shape. She opened it eagerly and poured the contents on her friend's lap.

First came a diary with some loose letters, then a book, very flat, in green silk, fastened with an elastic band. One by one they examined the pockets. A crumpled bundle of Treasury notes rewarded their search, some visiting cards and lastly an object in faded leather with tooled edges and gilt spring.

Isoël pressed it with her finger and it flew open. From both the girls came a sharp "Oh!" of astonishment, not unmixed with admiration.

For within the case was a miniature set round with a row of brilliants which glittered in the foggy room with an opulent effect.

"Diamonds! D'you think they're *real?*" Patty spoke in a hushed voice.

But Isoël was gazing down at the portrait, heedless of its setting. She saw a girl of her own age, with soft brown hair parted primly above the delicate narrow brow.

One long curl hung down by her cheek and fell across a sloping shoulder, fully revealed by the low-cut dress drawn together with a "tucker." The pale blue eyes and small pink mouth held the shadow of a smile, conscious yet supremely modest. It set the seal of the period on the carefully painted portrait. Here was no Beauty of patch and powder but a tender Early Victorian maiden, full of that prudish sentiment which had replaced stronger emotions.

Isoël wondered silently at it, aware of the enormous gulf between the type and her own girl-friends, unwarranted by the space of time it had taken to produce the change.

Patty summed it up briefly.

"Looks as if she couldn't say bo to a goose doesn't she?"

"Yet she's pretty," said Isoël. "Quite pretty and — ineffectual!"

"Well, I wouldn't change places with her."

Isoël, still upon her knees, glanced up at the freckled face with its snub nose, fiery hair and bristling crown of curling pins. But the blue eyes were quite sincere. It was evident that Patty meant it.

"Can you see her doing munition work?"

Isoël laughed.

"Tatting you mean? All the same she'd appeal to men. Pliant and not too clever." She spoke rather scornfully. "As a proof of that statement here she is carried against some old man's heart, probably some bachelor who having failed to make her his wife still believes in her perfection."

"What a cynical mood we're in! Cheer up! We'll count the money."

With her blunt fingers and pointed nails — a perpetual fight between art and nature — Patty attacked the bundle of notes.

"Seven pounds! It looked more. Still there ought to be a reward, a good reward, offered for it. Specially if those diamonds are real," she added rather wistfully.

But Isoël made no reply. She had taken up the slender book with its dark green cover, opened it and found a paper one within, a little yellow volume of tickets familiar to the clients of "Cook's."

"*London to Dover*" caught her eye. Then as she turned the first page, "*Dover to Calais*" and suddenly a hand closed round her heart.

"Why, they're tickets for abroad!" A breathless joy was in her voice. "Oh, Patty! Could I use them?"

"Better not. You might get caught. Besides, what would you do out there? Far wiser to take them back with the case and claim a good reward. It's quite easy; there's the name plain as Punch on the visiting cards. But I'd hold out for a decent price, wait a bit and watch the papers. You know how mean people are. One of our girls gave back a ring to a customer that she'd left behind, a big ruby with diamonds round it, and all she got was half-a-crown! Poor Lizzie! She did look sold. It doesn't pay to be *too* honest — not with the 'leisured classes.'" Her snub nose attempted a sneer and she darted a glance at Isoël who was wont to check any attempt to draw invidious distinctions.

But the girl's face was a mask. She sat back on her heels, her eyelids lowered, her cheeks pale, the tickets clasped in her hands.

"I'd sooner have these than any reward."

Her voice had a far-off dreamy note. Beneath the lashes that formed a dark silky line on her smooth young cheeks, in a vision she saw golden gates opening out to the land of adventure. She heard the trains purring past to meet the roar and swell of the sea, and the fog faded, giving place to the glamour of the Southern skies.

Patty sneezed aggressively.

"There! I knew it. I'm in for a cold." She turned the letters over again, comparing the addresses.

"Wake up, Isoël! Ever heard the name of Groot? Sir Abel Groot. It sounds familiar." Her sandy brows were drawn together. "Why, of course! I've got it

now. He's a South African big pot. Owns mines over there. *Some* money, you bet! He's sure to offer a big reward."

Isoël nodded. Carefully she put the tickets in their case, closed the one with the miniature and gathered the scattered notes together.

"I shall take them back this afternoon." She glanced again at the envelopes. "Churton Square's not far from here. I must have found it near his house."

"Don't you do anything of the sort. Let him miss it and advertise." Patty paused. "What's the matter now?"

"Nothing." Her friend turned away. She placed the precious treasure-trove on the high old mantelpiece, and bent down to stir the fire. "It's about time we thought of breakfast."

Patty frowned, watching her and the obstinate set of her shoulders.

"I'm not going to let you take that back and throw away a chance of money. Just now, when you're out of work! You're not too proud to accept it, surely? Seems like an answer to prayer!" She laughed, then coughed as she caught her breath. "If you don't claim a reward, I shall. I shall say I picked it up myself!" She was much amused by this idea.

Isoël made no response. In her heart she was fighting a sharp battle. Never before had she been faced with such a terrible temptation. Who was to know? So she argued. The tickets might have fallen out. She could return the miniature and the money and prove her honesty.

Through her mind like a melody rang the four magic words: *Calais, Paris, Milan, Venice!* Blue skies and faëry seas. . . .

Patty's advice fell on her ears like the patter of the heavy drops that were darting against the window pane, a murmur senseless, monotonous, as the fog dissolved from congealed damp and smoke into dirty rain.

She bent over the wide grate and placed the kettle on the coals.

Patty was still talking hard, aware that something was amiss.

"Of course I was only chaffing, dear. You found it. It's your show! But if you ask me what I think—"

"I don't!" Isoël wheeled round. Her eyes were hot with sudden temper. In the pain of her honest resolution she felt the primitive human need to inflict pain on some one else. "I know perfectly what I'm about. I shall take it back this afternoon."

"Oh, very well!" Patty scowled, injured by the tone of voice. She picked up her book and began to read with an air of patience ill-rewarded. "Snapping my head off like that!" But she said the words under her breath and covertly she watched the girl, moving about the littered room.

Once, before the long mirror, Isoël paused and gazed at herself. Then with a sigh she turned away. Was all life mere illusion — *only* a game of "make-believe"?

For she swung dangerously to extremes, the prey of her vivid imagination.

Now, unconsciously, she drooped, all her energy dispersed. A languid grace was in her step, her Jewish eyes fatalistic.

"Acting again," thought Patty, scornful. "Figuring out how she will look when Groot hands her half-a-crown and tells her she's an 'honest girl'!"

Some wireless message must have passed between their brains, for Isoël's thoughts turned suddenly to that magnate and her cloud of depression began to lift.

She was seized with a new and pleasing idea. Perhaps in returning the letter-case she might run across fresh adventures, find an interest in this house. Gratitude was a powerful lever. Supposing Sir Abel had a son?

The fantastic theory gained ground. A fairy prince, crowned with wealth! The miniature, after all, might be that of Sir Abel's wife, the dead mother of his boy? Ruthlessly she destroyed the airy structure she had built around the Early Victorian lady.

Sir Abel Groot?

A self-made man. Perhaps a true philanthropist in more ways than the normal one of buying a title through charities. He would take an interest in herself, feel the link of a kindred ambition. She knew that people rarely

looked once at her and passed on; that she roused a vague speculation, appealed to that sense of curiosity which is stirred by the hint of a mystery.

Lady Manister had succumbed, prim and strict and old-fashioned, feeling the charm of the girl's picturesque half-foreign manner. Why not Sir Abel Groot?

She stole another glance at the mirror and smoothed down her pleated skirt, carefully copied by herself from one of Clotilde's winter models; straightened her collar of white lawn with a sudden memory of Anna who had coaxed one of the workroom girls to finish the border by machine; and noted with satisfaction how the simple blouse showed off her figure.

Who could say? The pocket-book might be a link in the chain of events so long mapped out by herself, a step forward in the game.

She began to sing in an undertone as she set out the cups and plates. Tosti's ballad rose to her lips:

"Ninon, Ninon, que fais-tu de la vie?"

Her voice was not strong but sweet and fresh. Patty, still watching her, marked the change in her appearance. The lines in her freckled face relaxed.

"That's all right!" she said to her book. "I wonder what took hold of her? Pride, perhaps. She's an odd sort. That mother of hers was a fool, bringing her up to believe she was meant for a fine lady because of her father. A pretty father, to run away and leave them both in the cart! I'd rather have my old Dad — with all his glass on a Saturday night!"

"Toi qui n'as jamais su l'amour . . ."

Isoël smiled as she sang, reaching up for the cracked mug that held their little store of sugar.

L'amour? Surely the golden key that would open the doorway to success together with her mysterious charm and the flawless figure that Clotilde had prized.

For love was no more to Isoël than a means to an end. She mistrusted men. Her cold young heart had never been touched by the few, though diverse, types she

had met. Lady Manister's visitors, seen from afar; the youths of Soho; Monsieur with his evil eyes, and the smug "travellers" whom she despised.

Never would she stoop to love and lose its power as a weapon. She had all a modern girl's disdain for a lapse from level-headedness.

To be loved?

Another matter! The fairy prince would see to that.

So she schemed, under the spell of her childish dreams, with the temperament inherited from Miriam who had lived, and died, a slave to Romance.

Groot? It wasn't a pretty name. Yet like the faded miniature it seemed to be set in diamonds. She pictured herself in a tiara.

"Don't forget the sausages," said Patty happily from the bed.

Isoël laughed. For a moment she stood, kettle in hand, but its movement checked as she held it suspended over the teapot.

"The sign of the Sabbath! I *had* forgotten. And now I've gone and made the tea."

She put the kettle down in the grate and gave way to her mirth.

Patty watched her, open-eyed.

"What's the joke?" The infection caught her. She laughed and coughed and laughed again.

"Always in the clouds, aren't you?" But her little blue eyes were good-humoured. She did not guess that her practical speech had cut across a glowing vision forming in her friend's mind; a vision of white and of diamonds and a wedding feast where a bride with shining honey-coloured hair drank deep from the goblet of life.

Nor that the vista, gathering depth, held the sapphire note of translucent skies and a faëry ship that ploughed the seas — *Calais, Paris, Milan, Venice!*

CHAPTER V

THE big house in Churton Square had a porch upheld by a pair of pillars, and Isoël was glad to stand under its shelter for a moment to recover her breath. She had walked quickly, the wind and rain beating against her.

The door of No. 5 was green, newly-varnished and bearing a knocker of silver in the form of a dolphin. She raised it and gave a sharp "rat-tat" that echoed through the deserted square with a suggestion of defiance corresponding with her thoughts.

For there is no mood more aggressive than the one born of conscious virtue. Through the worn crocodile case the tickets seemed to burn her fingers and a voice whispered in her ear: "It is not too late. Turn back, turn back!" But the door opened. A tall footman with a thin supercilious face was gazing at her inquiringly.

"Is Sir Abel Groot at home?" She looked past him with indifference. She had noticed at Lady Manister's that people talked round servants or over their heads as if they were spirits, disembodied yet necessary.

"Yes, madam." He hesitated. "But indisposed. I do not think that Sir Abel will receive to-day."

This was a blow to the girl. She had counted upon an interview. It upset the whole plan of action.

"I daresay he will see *me*. I've called upon a matter of business."

She made a slight movement forward and the man gave way, still dubious.

"If you'll give me your name, m'm, I'll h'inquire."

She stood now in the hall. It was vast and cold and badly-lit, with a chequered floor in black and white marble, bisected by a Persian "runner" that looked threadbare to Isoël's eyes.

Her ardour received a distinct chill, but she held out her wet umbrella with a gesture that was a subtle reproach.

The footman became deferential.

"*Thank* you, madam. What name shall I say?"

"Miss Dark."

He opened a door on the right and showed her into a room of lofty proportions with a fire, and switched on the electric light.

"If you'll wait here, madam, I'll tell Sir Abel."

He vanished, with a noiseless step. Isoël drew a deep breath and looked around her eagerly.

It was evidently the dining-room, well furnished, with Queen Anne chairs, an immense table — on which reposed as centrepiece a silver ship; a galleon wrought by a master craftsman, its feathery sails supported by masts and stays of metal, its square port-holes decorated with lace-like patterns in exquisite cunning tracery — and a bow-shaped sideboard laden with fruit, in Waterford dishes, and bowls of flowers.

But what impressed the visitor most was the wealth of pictures on the walls. Not an inch of the space was wasted. The heavy frames elbowed each other and, above them, were hung electric lights, screened by dark oxydized shells so that the full radiance should fall on each masterpiece beneath.

Isoël longed to examine them, but a thick fringe of dull red silk surrounded the group of central lights, which the footman had considered to be sufficient illumination for her and it left the rest of the room in gloom.

She drew off her damp cloak and threw it across the back of a chair, conscious that it disguised her figure, shown to advantage in her dress of close-fitting navy serge and sat down in a low arm-chair holding her feet out to the blaze, not forgetting to pull her skirt into graceful lines with an eye to her ankles.

"I shall stay here until I see him or one of the family," she decided, her chin set obstinately.

Then, quickly she turned her head.

A dapper little gentleman, with sleek black hair, had entered the room.

He came forward, peering at her in the fire-light, his

eyes half closed in the manner of the short-sighted. She took an immediate dislike to him.

"Miss Dark?" His voice was high, his manner fussy and important. "I am Sir Abel's secretary. Sir Abel regrets that his indisposition prevents his seeing visitors. But I understand it's a matter of business. Perhaps I could be of service?"

"I don't think so."

He stared at her, taken aback by this cool response. She settled herself in the soft chair and explained the matter deliberately.

"I have found something which I think belongs to Sir Abel Groot. But, as I am not sure of this and as it appears to be of value, I should prefer to give it myself into his hands. It would be more satisfactory."

"*Found?* Not the letter-case?" He betrayed immediate excitement and came closer. "How fortunate! Quite providential! Sir Abel has worried over the loss. In fact it has added to his illness. He *will* be relieved! May I take him the message?"

"You can tell him that I picked one up as I was returning from Church this morning."

"Capital, capital!" He rubbed his plump white hands together.

"And that I will give it to Sir Abel if he will spare me a few minutes."

For she had no faith in this illness; the subterfuge of a busy man to enjoy to the full his Sunday siesta.

The secretary's face fell.

"But there's no need for you to trouble. I can give you a description of it, with the contents, and if it tallies" — he indulged in a cackling laugh — "I presume you will be satisfied." An afterthought seemed to strike him. "Sir Abel will naturally wish to thank you. By proxy — that's understood." He paused for a moment, studying her, taking in her unusual beauty.

She turned her glowing eyes on him. There was mockery in their wonderful depths.

"I prefer to see Sir Abel myself."

The secretary changed his tactics. Leaning against the mantelpiece, a roving eye on the pretty ankles, he became suddenly confidential.

"Look here, you know, it's better not. He's got a sharp attack of gout. Not in bed, not so bad as that, but in the mood to be, shall we say, just a trifle autocratic? I shouldn't advise you to see him, really."

She was silent now, considering. The secretary watched her, amused. Her insistence had altered his first impression that he was dealing with a lady. He put her down as a milliner, "Devilish pretty and sharp as nails. Out to get a big reward. And why not?" he asked himself. "She'd turn many an old man's head."

"Better hand it over to me," he said with open familiarity. "Sir Abel's not ungenerous, but he doesn't care to be worried."

At this she sat up very stiffly. There is no one so apt to take offence as the individual who feels uncertain of the position he assumes.

"I think this interview may end." She had read the phrase in a magazine and it came in very appropriately. She stood up and reached for her coat.

The sleek young man laid a hand on it. For a moment they glared across the chair back, both obstinate and disgusted. Then, he shrugged his shoulders lightly.

"And the letter-case?" He forced a smile.

"Since Sir Abel declines to see me I shall take it direct to Scotland Yard. Of course it will mean further delay." Delicate malice was in her voice.

The secretary gave in.

"Well, just a minute!" He made for the door. "Confound the girl!" he said to himself. "Anyhow I'll prepare Sir Abel. She'll meet her match. He's in the devil of a mood."

But he did not go near the caller again. He reserved to himself the pleasant prospect of running across her in the hall in full retreat later on. The tall footman delivered the message:

"Sir Abel will see you now, madam. Will you come this way."

She followed him, cheeks warm with victory but her heart beating a trifle fast, up the wide gloomy staircase.

She was ushered into a smaller room on the first floor, dimly lit, the walls lined with innumerable books.

"*Miss Dark.*"

The footman retired. She found herself in the presence and advanced, a courageous smile on her lips.

In an armchair by the fire she saw a man of sixty-five or more, with a shrewd, ferrety face and a little pointed reddish beard. One foot in a felt slipper lay on a rest of padded leather; the other, encased in a neat boot, sprawled across the Turkey carpet.

Temper seemed to radiate from his wiry frame as he turned his head and gave her a penetrating glance.

"Good day." His voice had an ominous snap. "I understand that you've brought back a letter-case dropped by me and that you have some strange objection to handing it over to my secretary?"

"Yes." She stood there facing him, head erect and eyes sombre, aware of a sudden disillusion. *This* little ferrety man, with his beady eyes heavily sunk in pouches of flesh denoting ill-health, the Diamond King — Sir Abel Groot? "I picked it up in the fog this morning and when I found that it contained money and — other things, I concluded the owner would be anxious." Her voice strengthened as she went on. "That is why I took the trouble to come here on a day like this. It is not a pleasant afternoon."

Sir Abel nodded his narrow head.

"I'm much obliged to you," he snapped. "I had framed an advertisement to appear in the papers to-morrow morning offering a substantial reward. Of course that still holds good. There was not much money in the case but a miniature which I prize."

"Surrounded with diamonds," said Isoël.

Something in the way she spoke riveted his attention, a trace of contempt as though she wished to explain away his generosity. Languidly she moved forward and held out the letter-case.

"Perhaps you would look through the contents and see that they are all in order."

A faint smile curled his lips, which were full and fleshy beneath the grey invading the red of his moustache. He glanced at her with the eye of a man appraising a woman's charms.

"You're a very business-like young lady."

The light from the small reading-lamp on the table

"That is — it would have been — amusing! To get out of the fogs and damp. With somebody else to pay, you know!" She glanced up, caught his stare, full of cynical attention, and suddenly the tension snapped. Tears rushed up into her eyes. "Oh, it's all very well for you to smile! But you don't understand what it means. To long and long for anything and know you have no earthly chance! *You* can have all that you fancy — anything that money buys! Why, I'd give the best years of my life— " She left the sentence incomplete and passionately, hopelessly, flung her secret grudge at him: "You haven't tried being poor!"

"Haven't I?" He smiled grimly. "I've sold papers in the streets in Cape Town as a lad. You can't be much poorer than that! You shouldn't judge by appearances." His beady eyes ran over her, curious and interested. "Well, why didn't you keep those tickets? Since the maggot of travel's in your brain."

"I couldn't." Her voice had sunk again. "There was my father—"

She checked herself as the door opened and the footman appeared with the tea. Slowly he proceeded to lay the massive tray upon the table and arrange the dishes with scrupulous care. Both watched him impatiently. As his solemn step died away reluctantly down the passage Sir Abel resumed the conversation.

"Your father objected, I suppose?"

But Isoël had regretted her outburst. She felt slightly ashamed of herself and took refuge among the tea-things.

"Shall I pour out?"

Sir Abel nodded.

"If you will. No milk for me. Thanks." He took his cup from her hands. "What does your father do?" he asked.

For many years Isoël had given her parent decent burial. It saved such a lot of explanations.

"He's dead," she corrected gently. She helped herself to a *foie-gras* sandwich with a pretty show of slim fingers newly-manicured by Patty, part of the Sunday ritual. "He was a captain in the Navy."

"English?" Sir Abel's eyes narrowed.

"Yes, although my mother was French. I was born abroad, at Monaco. My people had a villa there."

Sir Abel's face was inscrutable. He drank his tea thirstily.

"And they're both dead?"

"Some years ago." Isoël smiled sadly. She was warming to the needs of the story. "I was left very badly off. You know what naval pensions are? I had to do something for myself even while my mother lived. I became companion to a lady — a titled lady."

Sir Abel smiled.

"And you liked it?"

"Pretty well. She was extremely kind to me and took me about among her friends. But of course it was very different to the old life of my childhood."

"Yes, I suppose so."

What did he mean? Isoël felt a faint qualm.

There was something suggestive in his voice, a slight hint of amusement. When he spoke again it had vanished.

"And now?" he prompted genially.

She laughed, with a shrug of her shoulders.

"I've joined the Great Unemployed. I'm thinking of munition work. I should like to feel that I could be of use, however small, in this crisis."

There followed a silence, disappointing, after this patriotic speech.

Presently, without comment, Sir Abel resumed his catechism.

"You live in town?"

"Yes, with a friend. In a flat." She smiled behind her tea-cup. Well, it certainly *was* a flat; "self-contained" a good description!

"Won't you cut that cake? No, not for me. I'm on a strict diet at present. Why do you want to go abroad?"

The question took her unawares.

"I don't know. I always have. I remember my old home there." She leaned forward, more natural; the alert look died out of her eyes. "It's the colour, I think, and the sunshine; the sense of adventure in the air. Here everything is so drab and always the same!" She shivered slightly; a dreamy look came into her face. "I re-

member, at Monaco, we used to go out on warm nights and look across to the Casino. It's wonderful, a fairy scene! All those little dancing lights on the point that juts out to the sea, with the white 'Rooms' and the hills beyond and the deep luminous water below. Like silver lace fringing the edge of the blue mantle of the Madonna." She clasped her hands unconsciously. "Now at night I lie awake and listen to the trains outside. The room we live in looks out on the line, the main line. It's always crowded." Sir Abel made a note of the slip. It filled a vacant place in the puzzle. "I love to hear an express roar past and follow it in imagination. There's something always calling me. Is it the sea?" Her eyes were wide. She looked as though she saw visions. "It's like an ache that nothing can cure. It makes me feel an exile here, beating against iron bars."

Silence followed the long speech. Isoël was lost in dreams. If Sir Abel had satisfied a whim he had also gained in the process an unexpected variety in the moods exhibited by his guest.

He believed about a third of her story. The naval parent was a fraud; more likely to have been the captain of some tramp steamer, he thought. The "flat" had diminished to one room. That villa now at Monaco? He smiled into his reddish beard. Yet the girl interested him. He offered himself the luxury of a social experiment. Why shouldn't she play the rôle she craved?

He raised his head with a sudden jerk.

"Can you spare me another cup of tea?"

She started and apologized.

"I'm sorry. Of course! I wasn't thinking."

"Picturing yourself in Venice, eh? I think that's the only cure for you."

She gave him the hurt look of a child who sees a toy, long desired, dangled far out of reach.

"And why not?" he resumed as she came across, cup in hand. "It's only a matter of arrangement. You say you have nothing to do just now. It's a pity to waste the tickets. Then, of course, there's the reward for returning my missing letter-case. I'd figured it out at £50. That ought to see you through. A week or two at a quiet hotel—*For God's sake,* girl, be careful!" She sprang

back, horrified. "Never go near a gouty man," he grumbled, his face red and mottled. "If you'd touched that leg-rest you'd have killed me!"

She could not answer, too bewildered. For her thoughts moved in a mad circle. Fifty pounds — Venice — gout!

"There — sit down!" He laughed at her. "My bark's always worse than my bite. What do you think of my little plan? I'll only make one stipulation."

"Yes?" She found her voice at last.

"You shall write to me when you get there and give me your first impressions. The place, the people, everything. Honestly, though; no frills and graces! I'd like your opinion on the pictures — especially the Carpaccios! Your own, mind, not second-hand. Just exactly how they strike you." He was shaking now with silent laughter, speculating on the result: Venice as seen through her untrained eyes above all her notions on Art. "When can you start? You'll want a passport. Travelling's not easy now. But all that can be arranged. I'll put you up to everything."

Isoël seemed to come to life, to emerge from this bewildering dream.

"But I can't!" she gasped. "You don't mean it? It's a joke! The tickets, and *fifty pounds*!"

"I'm quite serious." He nodded his head, touched a little, despite himself, as he saw the tears well up in her eyes. "If you'll go to that writing-table there, you'll find a cheque book and a pen — a fountain pen. Bring them here. And what's your name? Dark? What else?"

"Isoël," she answered faintly, as she returned with these articles, too bewildered to disobey him.

He tapped the point of the pen on his nail and wrote out the cheque in a small crabbed hand with a flourish under the signature.

"There." He handed it to her.

She slipped down upon her knees, the action dramatic but sincere.

"I'll pray for you every night of my life! I can't thank you. I don't know how! It's like some wonderful fairy gift." Beneath her emotion, youth bubbled up and swept

her straightway to laughter. "I always knew it would come like this!" She sprang up and stood above him laughing down into his face. "Sir Abel Groot, you're a *duck*!"

"Am I? That's news." He could not resist the infection of her childish gaiety. "Don't presume too much on it; you haven't got the tickets yet!"

"Ah, but you will?" She was coaxing now. "You're not a man to do things by halves."

"It's a mercy then that I'm tied by the leg." He looked at her wickedly. "Here you are!" He tossed the thin volume of tickets up to her. She caught them. Extravagant, she pressed her lips against the cover.

"*Venice*!" The word was eloquent.

"I'm not sure you're to be trusted, careering over the Continent. You're not afraid of getting lost? Or kidnapped?" he added slyly.

"I'm used to looking after myself." She did not resent the imputation. "When I was *mannequin* at Clotilde's —" She bit her lip.

Sir Abel chuckled.

"Companion, you mean, to a lady of title?"

"No. That's true." Ingenuously she admitted him into her deceptions. "I went there when Lady Manister died. I thought it would be rather fun."

"And was it?"

"Not altogether. Monsieur was — well, a beast! But I paid him out before I left."

"Tell me?" The beady eyes twinkled.

She acted the scene for his benefit.

He watched her with growing admiration, her pretty posings and shrewd effects, her mixture of innocence and guile.

"By heavens, if I were well enough I'd take you to the shop to-morrow and order a smart dress for you. Would you like that?" He watched her closely.

"No, though it's very kind of you." She did not offer any reason.

Sir Abel deliberately forced her hand:

"You wouldn't accept clothes from me?"

"It's a different thing, isn't it?" She gave him back glance for glance.

"You're right." He nodded his head gravely. "When you marry I'll give you a wedding present. You mean to marry?"

"Some day."

"And marry well?"

"Why not?"

Her little air of dignity was delicious. He chuckled, pleased.

"You certainly ought to. You're ambitious and you've 'got the goods,' as the Yankees say. But you want to get your story pat; it's a bit too loosely linked at present."

She did not resent his outspoken words. She was too thrilled by the great adventure. "Poverty is no crime, but it's wiser to bolster it up with facts. You'll have to learn the virtue of silence. Never show the cards in your hand and only bluff for high stakes, not as the rule but the exception."

She nodded wisely, her eyes bright.

"But I'm not penniless," she cried, "I've got my *dot* — a hundred pounds!"

At this vast fortune Sir Abel smiled. Then his face became grave again. He felt a new curiosity.

"And you haven't touched it? Not a *sou*?"

"No, *ma foi*!" she tossed her head. "I'd sooner starve."

His brows went up. Here was a strange contradiction.

"Not even to cure your love of travel?"

"No." Her mouth closed, obstinate.

"H'm!" said Sir Abel. "You'll go far."

"I mean to," said Isoël Dark.

CHAPTER VI

CALAIS was disappointing. Paris, circled round in the dark, remained a city of mystery, whipped by narrow lines of light, with gloomy patches of high houses. Then followed the long night of uneasy sleep as the train rocked and fretted against the grinding brakes when they slackened speed before a station. Hoarse voices and slamming doors and the sudden vision of glaring lights which pierced the blinds ruthlessly brought Isoël many a start to stare about her in amazement.

Then, as they slid forth again into a chilly unknown world, she would hug herself with sheer delight in finding her dream realized.

On the opposite seat lay a mother and child, blotted out by a tartan rug, and above in the rack were their two hats, black, with heavy crape veils.

The little girl slept serenely but her widowed parent, wide-eyed, watched the swinging knob that fell from the screen drawn closely over the light. Whenever Isoël's eyes opened, they fell on that white impassive face, and once, in the middle of the night, she heard a sound of stifled sobs, easing the overburdened heart.

Here was some victim of the war robbed of the husband of her youth, returning to her parents' arms like a wounded bird back to its nest.

The memory added a sobering touch to Isoël's waking thoughts when the dawn came stealing in, first grey, then tinged with a rosy promise.

She crept to the window and peered out between the woodwork and the blind and saw a fair land of hills with a silvery stream leaping down on its rocky bed to a distant valley; then, with a little catch of her breath, against the sky, a rounded peak, white and glistening, capped with snow!

Swiftly there followed fresh delights: toy-like chalets and dark pinewoods and the country began to waken to life, with mouse-coloured kine tolling their bells and the

thrifty, solid peasant-women, armed with heavy fork and basket, cultivators of the soil.

The gay "toot" of the little horns, blown at the wayside stations, made her smile; and presently they drew up at one of these, the engine snorting, thirsty for water.

Below, on the platform, she saw a stall, covered with bowls of steaming coffee and crisp rolls in a pyramid, propelled by a sturdy girl in blue with a black shawl pinned round her shoulders.

A man was shouting lustily some warning about the length of the halt. Isoël let down the window and hailed him in her mother tongue.

"Can one descend?"

"*Mais oui, madame. Dix minutes d'attente.*"

He opened the door and she clambered down, making her way to the coffee-stall.

The platform began to hum with life. Travellers, with ruffled heads and loose costumes hastily screened by flapping ulsters, yawning, stamping, clustered about the vendor of food, and a shrill buzz of talk arose, a clatter of crockery and coins.

Isoël stood a little apart, feeling the keen, crystalline air stir the loosened hair beneath the motor veil wound round her head. She could have sung aloud for joy. Never had coffee been so good, bread more crisply satisfying!

She got back into the carriage regretfully as the "toot-toot" of the little horn blew warningly; in her wake the widow and child.

The train moved on again and they fell into conversation. The pair, she learned, was bound for Milan. The mother, of Italian birth, had married a Parisian. She still talked French with the sonorous vowels and rolling r's of her own country.

She spoke calmly of her trouble; her husband had been killed by a shell — "Like that! Gone in a second!" But Isoël could not forget the quivering figure in the night, crying silently into her pillow.

She played with the child, showing it the contents of her dressing-bag. It was her most cherished possession; an old-fashioned pouched affair long discarded by Lady Manister, a relic of her bridal days. After the old lady's

death, the cousin who inherited the house and all that it contained had found it in an attic cupboard and had given it to the departing maid, as a souvenir of her mistress.

The lining was of faded *moiré* and one of the narrow bottles was missing; but a pair of worn ivory brushes, yellowed with age and engraved with a monogram and coronet, lent it a certain dignity, together with other minor fittings.

As she held the ivory glass in her hand and combed back her thick hair Isoël noticed that Madame Dupont's eyes were riveted on the back. She guessed that the little coronet had aroused lively speculation and it brought Patty back to her mind; Patty, tearful at her departure and inclined to mistrust Sir Abel Groot.

"You'd better give yourself a title while you're about it!" she had mocked. "With those brushes on your dressing-table who's to know you're not a peeress? 'The Lady Isoël!' Sounds to me like the heroine of a society story. You want a *lorgnette*, a string of pearls and a lap-dog and you're complete!"

For Patty had taken the news hardly. She saw this beloved, teasing friend slipping away out of the range of her scolding tongue and tender heart; faced with dangers unrealized, embarking on perilous seas of adventure without the ballast of her counsel, a creature of impulse and wilful moods!

"It's only for a few weeks." Isoël had tried to console her. "And I shall write you long letters and tell you everything that happens."

Patty, sitting on the trunk, forcing the hasp into place, had looked up with a wistful glance.

"You'll never want to come back to *this*." Her gesture embraced the untidy room where the unstrapped holdall and remnants of paper added to the desolation. "You and your munition work!" Her laugh had broken in the middle. Isoël, unusually gentle, had hugged the plump despairing figure. "And don't go writing to that old Groot!" Patty had wiped her eyes fiercely and resumed the attitude of mentor. "I don't trust him — not an inch! He ain't generous for nothing. And the old ones are always the worst!"

"I *must* write. I promised to. Besides —" Isoël had

reddened. "He's not that sort and he knows what I am." She had tossed her fine head in the air. "I can look after myself, thank you."

"*Can* you!" Patty had sighed.

Long after the two girls had lain down in the narrow beds, side by side, she had stretched out a hand and groped for that of Isoël's.

"You'll come back? Swear you will? Straight here on your return."

"Post haste from the station! I promise." Isoël had answered. Little she guessed that the careless words would prove a test to her loyalty.

Patty had turned over again, comforted, in the dark.

. . . . . .

The crisp sunny day wore on. Then the blue sky overhead was blotted out by the famous tunnel. The little girl began to cry, alarmed at this travesty of night.

"It's a naughty train!" She clung to her mother. "I know it's taken the wrong turning!"

This naïve suggestion amused her elders. Isoël enlarged upon it.

"It's only tired and wants a nap, so it's crawled into a dark corner. Listen! Can't you hear it snore?" as the dull echo from rock to rock rose in an increasing rumble. "Poor train! It's come so far — all for you and Mother and me — and the dustman's thrown sand in its eyes. I think I see some in yours."

"Then I'll go *dodo*." She snuggled down, her little round head on the black lap with its deep border of rusty crape.

The two women smiled at each other. They were very good friends by now.

Then with a whirl of steam and smoke out again into blinding light. The child sat up and clapped her hands. Isoël let down the window.

"Is it Italy yet?" she asked, excited.

"No, we haven't passed the frontier. We stop there for the Customs. They examine all the smaller baggage."

This ordeal proved a simple affair for the two first-class passengers, and after a rather lengthy halt they slid slowly into Lake-land. The scenery held Isoël mute;

beauty of hill and blue water, where little boats with bright awnings, white villas and sloping gardens with marble steps and terraces appeared fairy-like and dazzling.

On again, leaving the hills, into the rich cultured plain till, at last, Milan was silhouetted against the first pink clouds of the sunset.

Milan — the third magical finger-post in her road of adventure.

Here she parted from her friends regretfully, watching the pair become involved in the bustling mass of porters and luggage. But after a little, to her surprise, they returned, hailing her from the platform. The child held a knot of flowers, pink carnations, crushed in her hand. Her mother lifted her up to the window.

"*Pour vous, madame,*" she lisped, bright-eyed, offering her little gift. "*P'isque Madame est bonne Alliée.*"

Behind her, haloed in its veil, the pale sad face of the mother gleamed, a mournful smile on her lips, proud of the child's well-learnt lesson.

The pretty, pathetic incident touched Isoël profoundly. Even here, in a country at peace, the shadow of war was creeping apace, greedily claiming fresh victims.

For the first time she felt weary and wished the journey at an end. It was the hour of rest from labour, and in the many-towered city bells rang out low and solemn, from the deep note of the cathedral to that of the newer university.

Isoël settled down in her corner and prayed that she might be left alone. Slowly the long platform cleared and then, to her suprême disgust, the door was opened by a porter, heavily weighed down with luggage.

He stumped in, slammed the pieces on to the seats and made way for a pair of ladies, obviously British.

They were dressed in identical coats and skirts of Harris tweed. Both wore spats over square-toed brown boots; but here the resemblance ceased.

For the taller woman, with short grey hair, was essentially masculine in appearance, from her flannel shirt with a man's collar, secured by a gold safety-pin above a neat knitted tie, to her waistcoat, across which dangled a single eyeglass strung on a cord.

Her companion was rather short and fat with a meek, sallow, harassed face. Her faded hair was puffed out, with a fringe, under a crushed-looking toque with a pom-pon of tulle and violet quills. Beneath her flaccid double chin was a little fall of pleated lace, crooked and held up by a brooch set with a fine cameo.

She had small, fluttering, nervous hands that fingered the luggage helplessly and then returned to her open purse from which, with a flurried air, she took some coins and handed them to the porter.

"What did you give him?" asked her sister in a deep voice like a man's.

The whispered answer made her frown.

"Ridiculous! Far too much."

She gathered up a bundle of rugs and shot it into the rack above, let down both windows with a bang and chose the corner by the door.

"Phew! Isn't this carriage hot? You'd better sit there, facing me."

"Which way does the train go?" the sister bleated. "You know, Judy, I can't stand my back to the engine."

"Well, we can change, if it's wrong." She drew out of her coat pocket an envelope and a pencil. "Now! What did you pay the cabman?"

They proceeded to wrestle with accounts.

Isoël watched them, half-amused, half-indignant. She sat wedged between the window and a sharp-cornered basket with a heavy coat on top of it.

They seemed to ignore her absolutely, but after a little the "man of the party," as Isoël had christened her, turned and gave her a long, cool stare. She leaned across to her sister.

"French?" The whisper failed in intention.

The sheep-like lady stole a glance and waggled her chin in agreement.

Something else passed between them, unflattering, Isoël guessed. She thought it was time to assert herself. The train had started, a chilly wind drove through the open windows. Resolutely she pulled up the strap and closed the one upon her right.

The "man of the party" glared at her, then across at her companion.

"Stifling, isn't it, Bella? But the French love stuffiness."

She did not attempt to lower her voice, but proceeded to push back the door that led into the corridor. It refused to stay in this position as the train swept around a curve. She fought with it and Isoël smiled. She knew that the fastening was broken.

But "Judy" was not to be frustrated. Diving into an ample pocket, she produced a penknife and coil of string and went outside to achieve her object, "Bella" meanwhile expostulating:

"I don't *want* to be a burden, but really, Judy, there's such a draught round my legs. I'm afraid of it; with rheumatism in my knee."

"Coddling won't do you any good," came the deep voice from the corridor. "You're always getting yourself so 'nesh.' I don't wonder you catch cold!"

"Perhaps, if I put on my thick coat?" The unfortunate Bella gave way at once. "It grows so chilly after sunset, just like the Riviera." She looked round her helplessly and her eyes fell upon the basket with the ulster sprawling over it. "Ah!" She reached across, vainly.

Isoël gathered it up.

"This one?"

"Oh, thank you." Bella's face flushed, a dull red. So the stranger was English, after all, or at least understood that language. "*Please* don't trouble!"

But Isoël smiled and passed the wrap, remarking lightly:

"It gives me a little more room. One gets so cramped on a long journey." She took advantage of Judy's absence to slide the aggressive basket lower, a manœuvre unnoticed by the owner who now appeared with a satisfied face.

"That's secure," she said briskly, and settled herself in her corner; but as she did so the string snapped and the door closed with a bang. "Damn!"

Bella jumped in her seat.

"*Judy*, dear!" Her voice admonished.

Isoël raised her fine brows. She looked the picture of propriety, but inwardly she shook with laughter.

The "man of the party" stumped out. They could

hear her whistling between her teeth as she recommenced operations.

Slowly the veil of night came down on the peaceful plains as they rocked along through fertile Lombardy.

Here and there the flat expanse of fields and dykes was interrupted by a line of dark cypresses and a peasant's cot, flat-roofed, with walls chalk-white or a faded rose, flashed past; the tower of a church with its stone cross and round clock face marked a village, strung like beads on the cord of a long winding road fringed by poplars, grotesquely pruned, with a thin young growth sprouting wildly from the maimed and bulging trunk.

Isoël felt hungry. It seemed many hours since lunch. She opened her dressing-bag and hunted for a packet of biscuits. Judy had switched on the light and it fell directly on the worn *moiré* lining and engraved backs of the ivory brushes. Isoël became aware that her companions were whispering, their heads together. At once she guessed they had marked the famous coronet!

Patty had tied a tight string round the bag of gingernuts, a parting attention from herself, and the knot refused to come undone. Isoël drew out the case containing scissors and other trifles, the train gave a sudden lurch and a thimble spun out on to the floor. It rolled across in a circle and disappeared under Judy's feet. She dived for it but failed to find it. Isoël rose, approaching her.

"Perhaps, if you would stand up — I'm sorry to give you the trouble."

Her voice was frigid. She balanced herself in the swaying carriage, one hand on the rack.

Bella was peering at the carpet in an ineffectual anxious way.

"It went *there*. I saw it roll. An umbrella?" she gazed wildly round her.

Meanwhile Judy was on her feet. She produced from out of her waistcoat pocket a silver match-box, struck a light and, sheltering it with her capable hands, stooped briskly and illumined the dusty space under the seat.

"It's in that corner. Hold hard! No need to blacken your hands. A stick's the thing." She reached up and dragged that article out of the rugs.

Her manner had changed, brusque but friendly. With the crooked handle she fished for the thimble, scooped it forth and picking it up laid it in Isoël's pink palm.

"There!" She smiled, keen, dark eyes on the pretty face of the owner.

"Thank you so much," said Isoël sweetly. She was glad that the ice was broken. "It has a mania for getting lost. It's only a trifle, but I prize it."

She went back to her seat and replaced the truant in its pocket.

"I've not much use for thimbles myself," said Judy with a jolly laugh. "This is more in my line." She produced a silver cigarette-case. "I wonder, would you mind if I smoked?"

"Not at all."

"Will you have one yourself?"

"No, thanks."

"Not a weakness of yours?" Judy struck another match.

"I'm not really fond of it, though I have smoked occasionally." She was anxious to keep up the conversation, attracted by this masculine creature, despite her first adverse impression. Eccentric but obviously well born. She cast about her for a topic and her eyes returned to her dressing-bag.

Should she put to the test its value as a link with aristocratic connections?

The fantastic idea appealed to her.

"I suppose it would have terribly shocked the dear old cousin who gave me this." She fingered the worn plated lock, underneath the morocco handle. "This bag was hers as a girl — or rather as a young bride — in the days of samplers and crinolines. Times have changed since then."

"Yes, thank heaven!" said Judy promptly.

Bella put in her feeble oar:

"It would be very interesting if the thimble could tell us its history."

Isoël caught Judy's eye and smiled.

"I think it would be quite discreet. Lady Manister could trust it not to give away ancient secrets!"

Judy inhaled a whiff of smoke and blew it out through her nostrils.

"Your cousin?"

Isoël nodded her head, avoiding the spoken lie. She had forgotten Sir Abel's advice to bluff rarely, for high stakes. The name had slipped out unconsciously; she resolved to elaborate the story.

"I used to live with her," she said. "She was very kind to me as a child and I missed her dreadfully when she died."

Bella sighed.

"Yes, I expect so."

Isoël felt reassured. She had noticed already that the label on the wicker basket was marked Verona. It was unlikely that she would meet these "ships passing in the night" again during her stay at Venice. She nibbled a hard ginger-bread, still aware of her craving for food.

"Do you happen to know when they serve dinner? I mean, in the restaurant car."

"I don't. We're getting off before. Have you come a long journey to-day?"

"From London." Isoël responded. "I shall be glad when I get to Venice."

"I should think you would," Judy agreed, crossing her legs with a generous expanse of bony limb in a knitted stocking above the long, well-fitting spat. "I loathe trains. Years ago I tramped down into Italy over the Mont Cenis pass. That's the way to see the country!" She sighed at the recollection. "But my sister's not up to it. We've been in Switzerland all the summer — were there in fact when the war broke out — and we're making our way by a roundabout route to Rome and later on to Naples. I don't think Italy will come in, do you? They hate Austria, but unless Germany plays up and gives them some valid excuse they're bound by that old Triple Alliance. What's it like in London now?"

"It doesn't seem to have altered much, except at night: the darkened streets, and a steady rise in the price of food. Still it's very depressing: bad news, fogs and damp — *et tout le reste!* I'm very glad to be out of it." She felt she was playing her part with ease.

"And you're going to Venice? Where do you stop?"

"At a place called the Pension Marini. Cook's recommended it. It's in the Fondamenta San Vio."

"Why, that's where Christabel is staying!" Bella broke in, full of excitement. "You know, Judy, Marion's girl, the second one who's just left school. I believe she's going in for Art. She's there with an aunt, a Mrs. Reece."

"Christabel?" Judy yawned. "Is that the leggy one, like a colt? Shouldn't think that *she* could paint." She glanced at the watch on her wrist. "We shall be there in five minutes. I'd better get those things off the rack."

She proceeded to do so, stacking them on the floor and seats, whilst Bella fussed, with a warning as to the weight of a certain suit-case, bursting its locks and secured by a strap.

"We might come on to Venice later," Judy resumed, ignoring her sister after a brief: "Heavy? Not it!—Depends on how we like Verona. I've always had to skip it before for want of time. I don't think now I shall find the atmosphere absorbing. Too much Romeo and Juliet!"

She pulled her waistcoat down with a jerk and settled the neat Hamburg hat more firmly on her head, stuck her eyeglass into her eye and gave Isoël a look so droll and full of understanding, that the girl loved her at that minute.

The train slackened speed abruptly.

"Well," Judy extended her hand, "I'm glad to have met you. So long. You'll be able to close all the windows now!" Her eyes twinkled maliciously but she held Isoël's fingers clasped in her own with a friendly pressure. "I really thought you were French, you know."

It was an apology of sorts.

"So I am. On my mother's side." Isoël laughed back. "Though my father was in the English Navy."

"Mine too!" responded Judy. "What's your name?"

"Isoël Dark."

"Judy, dear, we must get out." Bella was pulling at her coat. "And I can't see a *single* porter!"

"All right. No need to fuss." The "man of the

party" thrust her head through the corridor window, yelled "*Facchino!*" and came back. "You get down. Mind how you go!" She steered the sheep-like lady through the doorway and over the deep step. "Now, stand there, and don't get lost! I'll heave the baggage out."

After the last of it was lowered, she turned for a parting friendly glance.

"Tell Christabel Price you've met me. Judith Dalgleish. She'll remember. Coming, Bella!"

She was gone, big-boned and capable, as a faint bleat came out of the dark:

"Judy, I'm *sure* there'll be no cabs!"

CHAPTER VII

ISOËL awakened late and looked round her with curious eyes. At the bare cold floor with its bright rug on either side of the double bed, the porcelain stove in the corner next to the tiny washing-stand, all lit by amber rays that filtered through the closed shutters and danced in a pattern across her feet where a monster *duvet* in red cotton was thrown back over the rail.

From outside rose a musical cry, "Ohé . . . ! Ohé . . . !" and the soft cool splash of an oar dipping into water that gurgled up beneath the bow of a passing boat on the canal.

Venice!

She sat upright in bed and threw the hair out of her eyes. Stretching her arm out for her watch she found that the hands pointed to eight. But she did not ring for her coffee at once; she sank back again to recapture the wonder of the night before.

The modern station, so disappointing with posters and automatic machines, hurrying porters and bustle of Customs and then that quick step into a night radiant with a thousand stars, with the Grand Canal stretched before her, the low mysterious gondolas and the first delicious sweep forward over silent waters, reflecting the lights between the veiled white palaces.

Here was Romance that soared to the heights of all the dreams of her lonely girlhood. It was tinged soon with a touch of fear as they left the broad waterway and plunged into a narrow cutting between houses that rose like reeds out of the slumbering water itself, with only a strip of the starry sky far away overhead. The silence seemed intensified, and a perilous sense of adventure seized her as the silver prow cut its way through the warm darkness and disappeared in the indigo shadows of a bridge.

When they reached their destination and she crossed the narrow *fondamenta* to ring the bell nervously with a

glance up at the closed shutters, despite the beauty of the night she drew a breath of thankfulness as the door opened and she saw a little old woman with wrinkled face, toothless, a shawl enshrouding her head, holding a primitive oil lamp.

Upstairs lights shone out and steps resounded. A sharp voice called for the absent hall-porter, as the gondolier, his swarthy face like a brigand's in the fitful glimmer, bumped her luggage down in the hall and gossiped with the *concierge*.

She made her way up the stone stairs and was welcomed in an ante-room by a brisk young person who spoke broad Scotch and introduced herself as Miss Flinders, Signora Marini's secretary.

The "Signora" had gone to bed as she was tired. Miss Dark would excuse her. Would she like anything to take after her journey? A little wine?

But Isoël longed for one thing alone — sleep! She confessed to it. Miss Flinders smiled and led the way down a narrow paved corridor with numbered doors on either side and threw one open.

"This is your room. As you see, it is a double one but all we have vacant just now. It will be ten *lire* a day — to include pension, of course — not counting fires or lights. We make a small charge for candles or 3.50 a week for a lamp." She rattled it off with her Northern burr. "The luggage will be coming up in a minute. You have a pleasant view, looking out on the canal. Will you pay the gondolier yourself, or shall we book it?"

Her round, plump face with its high cheek-bones, stained by colour in circular patches, and dark hair, primly arranged, made Isoël think of a Dutch doll; not perhaps in its first youth but a little battered by conflict with life.

Here was a woman capable, close-fisted, yet not unkindly. She showed this in her next remark:

"You had better not be called to-morrow — unless you wish it? You must be tired. The trains are very unfortunate, this arrival in Venice close on midnight."

"But such an arrival!" Isoël smiled. "I wouldn't have missed it for anything. One's first glimpse in the dark — the silence and the mystery."

Miss Flinders nodded, unsympathetic. She had heard these raptures so often before.

"Then I'll say good night, if you've all you require?" She gave a sharp glance around and was off, her slippers tapping along the polished stone of the corridor.

The rest had passed in a mist of sleep. Isoël had been too tired to unpack more than the things for the night. The bed was delicious, as all beds are in a country where the mattresses are remade every year and exposed, whenever the room is cleaned, to the warmth of the sun at the open window.

Now, as she snuggled against the pillows and watched the light shimmering in through the latticed shutters, Isoël thought of the room she had left in smoke-dimmed London, heavy with fog and invaded by smuts.

"Poor old Patty!" She rang the bell. "I must get up and explore. It seems too wonderful to be here!"

A smiling chambermaid answered the summons. "*Buon giorno, Signorina!*" She placed a diminutive jug of hot water on the narrow washing-stand. Isoël had time to admire the graceful figure, rounded bust, and the blue-black waves of her hair, piled in a glossy knot on her head.

She asked for her *déjeuner* in French. The girl seemed to understand.

"*Sissignorina. Subito!*" She nodded, with a flash of teeth, white and pointed, that emphasized the glowing pallor of her face, as warm in note as any colour and lit by her dark expressive eyes.

Isoël, left alone, jumped out of bed, and athirst for knowledge, found the pocket dictionary she had bought for the great adventure.

"Subito" was translated there as "suddenly." She had yet to learn the elastic properties of that reassuring word.

"Then it's no good dressing first." She threw on her long travelling coat and opened the shutters, warm to her touch; then blinked, in the sudden glare.

Beneath her shone the still canal with a little bridge over which a slender dark-faced fisherman was moving with a leisurely step, a basket poised upon his head. His shirt was open, exposing a throat burnt a chestnut brown

by the sun, and round his waist was a cummerbund of a deep glowing Madonna blue. He passed underneath the window. The basket was full of some curious creatures with long tentacles that glistened, still wet from the sea.

Down the narrow thread of water came a wide and shallow market-boat piled with little red tomatoes, green stuff and yellow pumpkins, rowed by a swarthy individual who gripped the boards with his bare feet and thrust the oar, facing the bows; now erect, now bent forward, with a slow, monotonous, rhythmical stroke.

A group of children were playing about the steps on the further side, in ragged clothes, relieved from squalor by the faded colours that caught the light and blended into the dazzling picture; and, as if to add the sombre note that was missing, a priest, lean and sallow, his breviary open in his hand, paced with his shuffling heavy step in his black *sottana* close to the houses.

The shrill whistle of a steamer sounded away on Isoël's right. Leaning out, her coat held tightly round her, her eyes swept across another pair of narrow bridges to where, at the end of the canal, the flecked dancing waters met in the wide stretch by the Zattere. Between the blue of water and sky she could make out a hazy strip of land packed with shadowy houses, warm with the red of ancient bricks.

"I must go out!" She began to hunt feverishly for the things she needed, frowning a little as she placed her ivory brushes on the top of the chest of drawers which seemed to serve as well for a dressing-table.

Her thoughts had turned to Judy Dalgleish. In the clear light of the morning, she regretted the story that she had woven around Lady Manister.

"But perhaps they'll stay on at Verona. With Romeo and Juliet!" She laughed as she recalled the speech. What an odd character she was, that big-boned masculine creature with her timorous old maid of a sister. It seemed impossible to believe that they could have had the same parents. They ought to have been shaken up together, she thought, as she brushed out her hair before an unwieldy looking-glass that either bowed to meet the table or swung back against the wall.

Stefanina tapped at the door and came in with her

coffee and rolls. With the easy familiarity of the Italian serving classes that yet is so innocent of offence, she lingered to admire the wealth of Isoël's honey-coloured locks.

"The Signorina carries a fortune upon her head, like a saint's halo! She has brought the fine weather too! All last week it rained and rained. *Dio!* One would say the flood. And in Venice one has enough of water!" She shrugged her shoulders contemptuously. "Me, I am born in Firenze. There's a city, if you like! Gay and full of beautiful shops. The Signorina knows it perhaps?"

Isoël looked distressed. She could not follow the quick speech, though a word or two of its meaning reached her. The girl laughed and retired with a parting encouragement, airing her own small store of English:

"Mees understan' soona!"

Isoël sincerely hoped so.

The bells were pealing out ten o'clock as she made her way downstairs, through, what seemed to be, a deserted house, and out on to the sunny pavement.

She turned to the right instinctively, drawn by the view of the Giudecca that looked fairy-like and alluring through the narrow vista of the *rio*.

When she reached the Zattere she mounted the bridge that spanned the canal and stood for a moment drinking in the blue expanse and the narrow island, like a long fish with rosy scales basking in the sparkling water.

San Giorgio was its gleaming head and, far to the right, some dark chimneys suggested a flicker of its tail, lost among a sea of shipping.

She could feel the warm rays of the sun beating down upon her shoulders, but the air was crisp from off the lagoons, stung with salt and exhilarating.

It gave her a zest for exercise and she moved on up the broad pavement interested in the boats that thronged the various landing-places. A barge with a burnt orange sail drifted past and everywhere the black note of the gondolas added its distinctive touch.

Passing the house where Ruskin lived she came at length to the Dogana, that Custom House which apes a temple, with its shining columns and, far above, the gilded

figure of *Fortuna,* lightly turning with every puff of the fitful breeze on its poised globe.

Here was a view that quickened her breath; the heart of Venice bared before her.

She could see, beyond the glittering Molo and the lace-like Ancient Library, the Campanile straining up to pierce the cloudless dome of the heavens and, still further, the Doge's Palace with the Ponte di Paglia, dotted with little moving figures, the water alive with busy craft.

Where should she go? She seemed to have come to the end of her own particular island, and she glanced at the guide-book in her hand. Baedeker advised St. Mark's.

She moved down to the edge of the pavement and hailed a picturesque gondolier who was smiling at her with an eye to business. A dirty old man shuffled forward like a crab and thrust out his iron claw to grip the boat, assisting her in to her secret disgust, a greedy hand outstretched promptly for the *rampino's* perquisite.

Isoël overpaid him and gave the oarsman her directions.

"San Marco?" His eyes sharpened, scanning her fair excited face. Deliberately he propelled the boat in the opposite direction; past the Salute, bathed in shadows, and down the broad Grand Canal.

Isoël, a little puzzled, leaned back against the cushions, too lazy to protest. She soon lost all sense of direction as they turned into narrow waterways, between crumbling palaces, with faded coats of arms on the posts and multi-coloured ragged clothing hanging out of the higher windows; under bridges arched and pointed with glimpses of gardens tucked away behind old walls splashed with roses and delicate clusters of wistaria.

They emerged at last on the open space in front of Santi Giovanni e Paolo. The gondolier, confident of his fare's utter ignorance, paused on his oar to point out the famous Colleoni statue. On again until they reached the long Rio del Palazzo and the Bridge of Sighs linking the prison with the fairy-like walls of the Doge's Palace. Then out to the dancing sea and here the gondolier seemed to lose all control over himself. Shouting, joking, gesticulating, he wedged the high silver prow into the

congested mass of boats that swarmed round the Piazzetta.

At last Isoël found herself safe on land, with a sigh of relief. Haggling ensued. The gondolier held out for three *lire,* supported by his *parasite,* another crab-like individual. She could not understand a word save the reiterated price, three dirty agitated fingers thrust within a foot of her face.

She gave in at last with a laugh, intoxicated by the sunshine and the gay movement on all sides.

Her eyes instinctively mounted up to the winged lion overhead on its granite column, turning its back, for some unknown reason to the sea, and to its neighbour St. Theodore balanced on his crocodile.

The noise of a steamer churning up fussily to the little pier made her glance behind her again and suddenly she realized that here she stood on the very scene she had gazed upon from the *Dogana.*

There, just across the water, were the white columns and the globe upheld by the pair of giants.

After a moment of vexation at the trick played by the gondolier, she laughed aloud. It was too funny!

A man, passing, stared at her and turned again for another look. She made such a vivid picture of youth in the Spring sunshine, standing there, with her head thrown back, her sparkling eyes, lips parted, a-quiver with mirth.

Where had he seen that face before? He walked on with puzzled brows and turned slowly into St. Mark's.

Unwittingly she followed him, her mind absorbed by the wealth of mosaic, the fluttering pigeons, the sense of colour, and the unreality of this dream borrowed from the glowing East.

Before she entered the vestibule she glanced up at the façade and the parapet with the golden horses. She registered a childish vow to find her way there later on, envying the strutting birds, preening themselves high above her, the sheen of their breasts softly blue against the dazzling white of the marble.

Then she passed into the church; into a new atmosphere. Cool and shadowy and imbued with the mystery of her own religion, it sank slowly into her soul. Her

hand stole out to the holy water; she crossed herself reverently.

But slowly the feeling of awe lightened, giving place to curiosity. Tiptoe, she began to explore, pausing now to gaze at an altar set with jewels and plates of gold or wrapped in admiration before spiral columns of alabaster. New treasures at every step: a wonderland of mosaic, of glittering pictures that lit up the domes as she followed the story of the Creation down to that of the Deluge, delighted with the fantastic beasts and Noah carrying in the leopards.

At last, worn out, she sank down on a chair near the centre door. A couple of tourists brushed past her and she heard one say cheerfully:

"Waal, I guess we've done it now! All except those galleries and to write our names on the golden horses."

Her earlier wish returned to her, and following closely in their wake she mounted the staircase and stepped out into the glare of the hot daylight.

She found the gallery invaded by a crowd of visitors grouped around a guide who was holding forth at length on the history, from the days of Nero, of these equestrian spoils of war.

Isoël listened for a time, but wearied of the strident voice. Slipping past, she made her way to the farther end where she leaned against the parapet, enjoying the vivid scene below, aware of the ceaseless beat of wings. Pigeons, emboldened by her silence, fluttered round her and at last, to her inward delight, one settled down on her arm, its pink feet clutching her sleeve, bright eyes surveying her with the eager glance of a hardened beggar.

In the square beneath they were being fed by the ever-indulgent strangers to Venice.

"I can't give you any, *ma belle*," she whispered. "But I'll come again, my pockets full of grain for you."

She had this end of the gallery to herself save for a quiet figure, that of a man, on a broken-backed chair, discarded from the church within.

He was reading a book, legs crossed, hat drawn forward over his brow; an Englishman, she decided, after a stealthy glance at him.

Her eyes returned to the gay Piazza and fell upon the big clock. It was time to start on her homeward journey or she would be late for the *pension* lunch. Regretfully she retraced her steps, aware that her solitary companion had raised his head and was watching her and that distinctive graceful walk. Not averse to admiration, on reaching the door she glanced back in time to see him rise to his feet and move to the parapet.

"If you think I'm going to look up, *mon cher,* when I cross the square, you're mistaken!" She smiled to herself as she ran downstairs. "Now, how to get back? Shall I try the steamer? I'd sooner walk if it's possible. There must be a way if one only knew."

Passing out she heard again an American voice and addressed the speaker, one of an elderly pair of ladies, and listened to their kindly directions.

She must go through the arch, "right there," on up "the Merceria," take the first turning to the left and the first to the right, over a bridge, and follow the canal before her until she reached a large square with a church in it and very soon, they "guessed" she'd see the Grand Canal. Then over "the Iron Bridge" and after that it was "easy," though they seemed themselves a little vague as to where her particular *rio* lay.

They accepted her thanks smilingly.

"It's *some* place to find your way in! But if you get lost your best plan is to make for the nearest big canal and wait for a gondola."

Isoël, warming to the adventure, passed under the Clock Tower repeating the somewhat confused advice. As she emerged in the busy street she met a pair of young Venetians who stared at her with their bold, dark eyes and murmured some obvious compliment. She quickened her steps, her head high, but presently, as she came abreast with a shop, gay with strings of beads, coral and shells and coloured glass, she paused to gaze into the windows, attracted by the necklaces.

A voice breathed in her ear. Startled, she glanced up and saw that the two youths had followed her and were hemming her in on either side.

She stepped back, with flushed cheeks, furious, and

mixed in the crowd, loitering down the long causeway, that meeting-place beloved of Venice.

Moving rapidly through the throng she managed to shake off her tormentors, too indolent in the sunshine to pursue beauty at such a pace.

"In the broad daylight too!" she fumed, unaware that in Italy, a pretty girl, unchaperoned, is marked out for such attentions.

She was glad to take that "first turning" and leave the Merceria behind her, finding herself in a narrow *calle* bathed in shadows, empty and cool.

Down this she walked quickly. Once she turned and glanced back. A man was following in her wake with a long energetic stride, clad in a loose suit of flannels. She recognized the Englishman who had watched her from the parapet. Already upset by the contretemps in the hot and crowded main street, Isoël began to resent those determined steps which rang on her ears with the same persistence as she crossed a little *campo* and turned to the right, already confused in her directions.

She tried to reassure herself. No doubt he, too, was on his way to the Grand Canal by this known short cut. But as she flitted over a bridge she darted another backward glance and caught the shadow of a smile on the long grave face with its clipped moustache. Determined to put him to the test she forsook her route deliberately and wheeled again to the right, down a narrow passage where the houses seemed to meet above her head. Gloomy, and dirty underfoot, with the mouldy smell that hangs about Venice wherever the sun is banished, it filled her with a faint horror. A withered hag, crouching down on a greasy doorstep tried to stop her, hand outstretched, whining for alms, and above the venomous old voice she caught the steady "beat, beat," of well-made boots growing nearer.

"He too!" She breathed quickly. Indignation and wounded pride lent wings to her little feet. She longed to run, but dignity forbade the semblance of a flight. On she pattered, her high heels ringing sharply against the stones, worn and hollow, of the pavement and emerged at last on a tiny square, with a *trattoria* and an oil-shop

and the welcome sight of running water. If this should lead to a broader canal patronized by gondoliers, all would be well!

She turned down the narrow path that fringed the stream, which had a stagnant unused look, under the shadow of warped houses that grew more squalid with every step. A rough-looking man emerged from a doorway with an evil glance and her heart quickened. Her strength, too, was beginning to wane. She knew that her anger was giving place to a sense of panic and helplessness. Before her she saw a sharp corner where another canal crossed her own and her hope revived. She swung round it and stopped dead, utterly baffled.

The path had vanished!

Beneath her feet a flight of mouldy steps led down to the water's edge. On either hand it lapped the walls of the dark old houses and stretched away in a hopeless vista, broken by a series of bridges.

CHAPTER VIII

"EXCUSE me."

Isoël turned, her cheeks flushed, eyes dark with helpless anger and contempt.

The Englishman stood before her, panting a little as though the speed of the pursuit had told upon him. Broad-shouldered and strongly built, his great height carried off any suggestion of clumsiness. His lean, slightly saturnine face was lit up by a pleasant smile, and this added the fatal spark to the girl's smouldering resentment.

"How dare you?" She waved him aside with a scornful gesture, her head high. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself. English too! You can't deny it!"

"Why — should I?" He stared at her, his speech jerky, catching his breath. And, suddenly he began to cough; cough like a man in the grip of consumption. The spasm tore him. He fought for air, eyes distended, his virile face patched with colour, almost choking.

She watched him, paralysed herself by the frenzy of the sharp attack, fascinated by the horror of seeing a strong man battle for breath.

"Sorry!" he gasped out at last. "Didn't mean — Only this." He held out a small red guide-book. "You left it on — the parapet."

Isoël gazed at the object, amazed. It was her missing Baedeker!

A wave of shame succeeded her first impulse of anger. She coloured up to the roots of her hair, biting her lips nervously. What a mortifying mistake! She took it from him without a word. Her eyes were lowered; she dared not meet the amusement she guessed would lurk in his.

To her relief he broke the silence.

"I'm afraid — you thought me — impertinent?" His speech was hoarse and staccato. "But it seemed — a

pity — you should lose it. I tried to catch you up before. But I'm rather a crock — just now."

As if in support of his contention a fresh fit of coughing seized him.

Now, in alarm, she raised her eyes and pity conquered her resentment.

Could this be a victim of phthisis? This splendidly built, vigorous man?

Between his spasms he read the fear on the girl's pretty upturned face.

"Don't be — frightened! Pass soon," he choked out in apology. Meanwhile, he cursed himself for this public exhibition of weakness. "Oh, damn!" She heard him mutter as he pressed his handkerchief to his lips.

"*Please* dont talk." She found her voice. "I'm so sorry. It's all my fault! If only I'd known — I didn't guess — and I'd been so annoyed already, by some perfectly hateful Italians!" She paused as she realized the lack of wisdom in this confession and promptly descended to a fib. "I was really running away from *them!* And then, finding I was lost, I hardly knew what I was saying." She wound up, suddenly prim. "I'm very much obliged to you."

His cough had ceased, but now weakness succeeded the bitter struggle. He leant up against the wall of the house beside him, his eyes half closed, the colour ebbing from his face.

She looked at him anxiously.

"I wish I could get you something to take. Perhaps if I went back to that inn by the bridge they might have some brandy?"

The word seemed to stir the man out of his silent lethargy. His hand fumbled with his coat and found in a pocket a battered flask.

"Good — idea!" He tried to smile, but his fingers shook as he played with the stopper.

"Let me do it." She took the flask, opened it and poured out the spirit into the silver cup. "Neat?"

He nodded.

"Old offender!" he volunteered.

Standing on tiptoe she reached up and held it to the parched lips.

"Thanks." He drank obediently, gasping as it stung his throat.

"There now, you'll soon feel better." The rôle of Good Samaritan appealed to her. Her quick eyes had noted the ring upon his finger, a heavy signet with a crest. She began to wonder who he was.

Of gentle birth assuredly. The way his clothes hung on him, loose-fitting but well cut, pointed the fact. They seemed to be a part of him, as unconsciously easy as his bearing, yet touched by a soldierly precision.

Meanwhile his deadly faintness passed. Under the stimulant his face assumed a healthier colour, his eyes lost their strained expression.

He opened his lips to speak but she checked him.

"You shouldn't talk." Her voice was gentle. "Just keep still. I understand. When my mother was ill with pleurisy I remember she was just the same. So exhausted afterwards. And it must be harder for a man."

He gave her a quick grateful look. How pretty she was standing there with that grave and pitiful expression, her profile clear against the water, shadowed by the gloomy houses. The air of decay that hung about the mouldy and deserted *rio* seemed to emphasize her youth and the grace of her rounded figure.

"I'm quite all right." His voice was stronger. "Thanks to you. You're awfully kind."

She smiled back, inwardly relieved by this quick recovery. Then she turned her head with a start, gazing across the line of bridges. From far away came the sound of an oar dipping softly into water.

With the movement an ear-ring had swung outwards to fall against her cheek, a long drop of pale green jade. The man's grey eyes dwelt upon it with a puzzled expression. Then they cleared. It touched a chord of memory: that tedious hour spent at Clotilde's with Tory Serocold on the day when Ernest's ship went down in the Narrows. His sister's anxiety and relief over her sailor husband's escape had driven the incident from his mind. But here, in the flesh, stood the girl, the *mannequin* who had caught his fancy.

What a curious coincidence!

He remembered now that the first glimpse he had caught of her in the Piazzetta had seemed familiar: those glowing eyes, cold young lips, and the perfect figure.

"It *is* a gondola!" Her voice with its faintly-foreign accent stirred him. "Empty, too. Now, isn't that luck?" She pointed a slender hand downstream.

"Then we aren't hopelessly lost?" he suggested.

"You're better!" She spoke with simple triumph. She had assumed the motherly air of a woman of forty and with it the power that every daughter of Eve acquires when dealing with a sick man. "I was wondering how I'd get you home."

"Were you thinking of carrying me?" he laughed. The smile died out of her pretty face and he went on rather quickly, "I'm not really an invalid — which sounds ungrateful! I don't mean that. I'm awfully obliged to you." He saw that he had made a mistake.

"I don't think you ought to talk." Her voice was cool.

Leaning forward she beckoned to the approaching boat.

"But I want to make up for loss of time." His eyes twinkled as he watched her and her little assumption of dignity, this very sedate *mannequin!* "In a moment or two you'll be swept away in that gondola and I've hardly thanked you."

"Oh!" She glanced up, surprised. "But it's for *you,*" she explained simply.

"Certainly not. Unless you'll share it?" He smiled down at her from his height with a masterful air, and added, in mischief, "Besides, I'm not well enough to be left."

"I think you are," she said coldly.

She beckoned to the gondolier, who quickened his stroke, bending forward, pleased to find a customer on his route back to the main canals.

"I say, you're not offended, are you?" The boyish question pierced her guard and divining this he went on in a graver voice, "You don't think I'd go away and leave you stranded, by yourself, to find your way out of

the maze, after all your kindness to me? I can walk home easily."

He had given her the chance she wanted.

"I shouldn't allow it." She spoke sedately. "If you'd take me as far as the Grand Canal—" She moved on to the flight of steps, leaving the remark unfinished.

"That's awfully nice of you." He meant it, though the insidious thought followed. "I wish Tory could see me now! Wouldn't she be scandalized?"

Isoël glanced back over her shoulder.

"Can you manage, all alone?"

"Rather—thanks. Take care of those steps. They're slippery. Wait a second!"

Following her, he held out his hand.

"As a sign of forgiveness?" He whispered the words.

The gondolier was gazing up with curious eyes, his boat moored, beneath the pair, where he stood grasping a ring in the wall.

But Isoël disdained assistance.

"I'm all right." She stepped in and settled herself against the cushions, drawing her skirts tightly round her to make room for her companion. Nothing loath he sank down beside her with a sigh of relief.

The gondolier still waited.

"Where to, *Signore?*" he demanded.

The Englishman laughed and glanced at the girl. She understood his mischievous scruple. He would not ask for her address. Aware of her silence, he broke the spell.

"I'm staying at Danieli's," he said. "Can I drop you anywhere on the way or would you like to dispose of me first?"

"I don't quite know where we are. I want to get to the Grand Canal"—she paused—"and the Fondamenta San Vio."

"Then that comes first." He gave his directions, and went on easily, "at least I think so. I've lost my bearings but I should say that this was one of those squalid *rios* that lie somewhere behind the Rialto. It isn't often

I go astray. I used to live here as a boy. My father was David Doran, the painter; I was born in a house on the Grand Canal."

"You had good taste, as a baby." A faint pause between the phrases flavoured the little speech with malice.

The man gave her an oblique glance.

"I certainly was a lover of beauty. I am still."

Isoël felt his keen eyes fixed on her face. The *riposte* amused her and quickened her wits.

"Aren't you glad to return to Venice? To your old love." Her voice was light.

"In some ways." He hesitated. "It's not for pleasure, but health, just now, with some family business thrown in. I got a bullet through my lung — the right one, luckily — and it's taken a long time to heal, leaving me with this tiresome cough. So long as I slack I'm quite well, but I'm not up to much exertion. I want to get back to the Front and although I love this dear old place I'm hardly in the mood for it." He smiled down at her startled face. "Though it's an ideal lazing ground. It's immoral to be energetic when one can lie in a gondola!"

"But didn't it hurt frightfully?" Her manner had changed, more friendly now: she was moved by this sudden reminder of war.

"No. Not at the time, that is. It was too exciting. One didn't think. At least —" He broke off abruptly and changed the subject as they turned into a wider channel of water. "Look there! Isn't that nice? Those crumbling steps and the old door with the creeper hanging over it. There's a garden inside. I went there once, years ago. It belonged to an artist, but he left because of the peal of bells in that campanile facing it."

She gazed, her heart in her eyes.

"It's beautiful!" She drew in her breath. "How could he leave such a lovely spot?"

"One of the bells rang flat. He said it spoilt all his work; that the cracked note got into his eyes until blue looked like green. We thought him mad, poor old chap! But he went blind in the end. I expect it was creeping over him then. Bad luck, wasn't it?"

"Terrible." Isoël shuddered. Of all places to lose one's sight in, Venice seemed to her the worst. Here in the midst of so much beauty! "What became of him?" she asked.

"Starved, I expect." His voice was grim. "A blind painter's about as useful as a riddled soldier nowadays!"

"Ah, don't!" She turned quickly, her sensitive face warm with pity. "You'll get all right. I know you will. It's not like a *real* disease."

Her sympathy, so genuine, touched him; yet he drew in his horns with the sudden virile fear that he had seemed to ask for pity.

"Of course." His voice was nonchalant. "I've been awfully lucky as it is. I never expected to get this leave against all normal regulations but they made an exception in my favour on what are known as 'compassionate' grounds." She wondered what the phrase covered. He went on lazily. "I'm not in Venice only for pleasure, but to straighten out my father's affairs. He left some earlier pictures of his with a dealer here and the man's a rogue. I won't trouble you with details but letters were no earthly use. It's pretty well settled now. Ah, here we are! I was right then."

She followed his glance as the gondola, with a warning cry from the man at the oar, swept out into golden sunshine and the glitter of the Grand Canal.

"There's old Shylock's rendezvous."

"The Rialto?" she questioned eagerly.

"Yes, straight ahead of us. Is this your first visit to Venice?"

"My first day," she confessed. "I only arrived late last night."

She leaned forward, wide-eyed, as they entered the shadows under the bridge.

"And you're satisfied?" He watched her, amused.

She did not answer for a minute, carried away by the scene before her; the white palaces seen by daylight, less ghostly than in the night, but exquisite with chiselled detail, and the gay striped posts that flanked the steps, leading down to the vivid water.

"It almost hurts." The confession escaped her.

He nodded his head, alive himself to the dazzling

glow of colour. His face, a little harsh in repose, softened as he drank it in. But his eyes went back to his companion with a puzzled expression that matched his thoughts.

She seemed to blend into the picture like some exquisite ghost of Byzantine days, the slender youthful grace of her and that nameless exotic touch he had noticed at their first meeting. She might have been a prize of war brought by a Doge from an Eastern land, some Circassian slave, still a rebel, chained to the deck of a painted galley.

"Mr. Doran"— She broke the silence. "That is your name, isn't it? Or should I say Captain Doran?" She was fearful of having made a mistake.

"No, I'm only a lieutenant. Well?" He smiled lazily, watching her green ear-rings swing as they rocked in the wake of a steamer.

"I was wondering what one ought to pay for a gondola. Is there any tariff?"

So she could be practical as well. She was proving an interesting study.

"I had an experience this morning." She related it amusingly, her first acquaintance with gondoliers, turning the laugh against herself.

He gave her a few useful hints for dealing with these grasping gentry.

"Rogues all, but picturesque and privileged accordingly. At any rate by your sex. Guides, too. Avoid guides as you would the plague. They murder Romance and bury it under dusty Facts — long recitals that break one's spirit. I only know of one who's sound."

"Yes?" She turned to him, unsuspicious, eager as a child for knowledge.

"Francis Doran, at your service." He joined in her surprised laugh; then followed up his advantage. "Honestly now, you might do worse. I know every stick and stone of the place and I should love to show you round. I hope you'll engage me on the spot!"

"After getting lost this morning?"

"Oh, come now! That's not fair play." He went on eagerly, a little surprised at himself, but his native

obstinacy roused, "Why not start with a trip to Murano? That's the place where they make the glass — and the gondolier tries to rook you that's it's a voyage outside Venice."

"But, since you've warned me, I shall remember." She was seeking for a way of escape or at least for time to think it over. It would not do to consent at once. She was careful of her dignity like all people who study their manners and have not solved one secret of life: that dignity is the unconscious essence thrown off by character.

"Besides," Doran was talking again, "You can look on the proposition as war work. I'm getting bored to tears alone and that is exceedingly bad for my health. What I need is intellectual employment and you ought to help a wounded soldier to win back his self-respect! After all we're fellow Britons. At least —" He paused in his laughing speech, recalling a certain conversation.

She was glad to change the first subject.

"I'm half English. My mother was French. But my father came from Devonshire. He was a captain in the Navy."

"The devil he was!" thought the man beside her, "and his daughter a *mannequin* at Clotilde's? Sounds like a fairy story."

For despite her genuine air of refinement there was something that rang untrue about her; "manners" perhaps instead of "a manner" and her quick touchiness over trifles.

She went on composedly: "I quite forgot to tell you my name when you gave me yours. It's Miss Dark." She added, uncertainly, "Isoël Dark," in an undertone.

"Of course!" He nearly said it aloud but just pulled himself up in time. "Well then, Miss Dark, are you going to be kind — as ever — and take pity on me? I can't really believe somehow that this is our last trip together."

Something in the way he said it, his smiling assurance, nettled her.

"I hardly know my plans at present. I may not stay for long in Venice."

Unrebuffed, he nodded his head.

"Then we'll have to make hay while the sun shines! Why not lunch with me to-morrow, and come to Murano afterwards?"

"I'm afraid it's quite impossible." She watched, with relief, the gondolier, turn the silver prow across the stream and into the Fondamenta San Vio. Recognizing home waters, she glanced back and held up her hand. "*Arrêtez!*" She signed to him to stop.

"*Avanti?*" he queried, white teeth flashing.

Doran corrected the mistake.

"You get out here?"

She nodded her head.

"Please." But she did not look at him.

"And I'm dismissed?" he asked with a laugh, though he felt a distinct touch of pique.

"Oh, no. That sounds ungrateful." He marvelled at her self-possession as she rose to her feet with a graceful movement. "Thanked instead for all your kindness, the lift home, and my Baedeker — the guide who murders all romance! But then, what can you expect from a Hun?" She stepped out upon the bank, evading his quick attempt to help her. "I hope you're feeling quite well now?"

"For the stringent tonic?" he suggested, "I'm not cured if that's what you mean. Yet you won't reconsider my remedy?" His eyes for a moment held hers, against her will, on the same level as he stood beneath her, in the boat. "It's distinctly unpatriotic, you know, to wander about with a German. I could give you better credentials than that."

"I can quite believe it," she said sweetly. "But perhaps I *prefer* to get lost." She held out her hand to him, feeling secure on dry land, and as he shook it, she dared the conclusion: "It leads to such amusing adventures."

"I'm glad you put it in the plural; it leaves me with a spark of hope! Au revoir, Miss Dark." He bared his head gallantly.

His hair, she saw, was a raven black, cropped close to his well-shaped head, and he looked younger without his hat. She put him down as about thirty. The

thick eyebrows formed a ridge over his deep-set grey eyes. They were keen and clever and compelling, the eyes of a man sure of himself.

"*Good-bye,* Mr. Doran."

He gave her a last thoughtful glance, then directed the gondolier. The stream was too narrow for turning here and the boat moved on up the canal.

Isoël was left behind. She bit her lip, suddenly doubtful of the wisdom of her conduct. Had she snubbed him too severely? Venice was a small place; they were sure to meet in due course. But supposing he took her farewell as final? *Tant pis!* There were other men, in a world so full of gay adventures.

When he reached the first bridge Doran turned and looked back.

She gave him a friendly wave of the hand and his face lit up as he responded.

That was all right then! The spell had worked. She was learning to walk in these new paths where pitfalls gaped on either hand to catch the socially inexperienced.

For little she guessed that Doran held the key to the whole mystery, and was now smiling to himself, recalling Clotilde's establishment. Yet the girl's caprices puzzled him, even that last glimpse of her.

She was walking slowly — dawdling, he guessed — to allow him time to disappear round the corner of the Zattere before she approached her mysterious address.

"I wouldn't mind betting anything," he conjectured, his curiosity piqued, "that she's staying at that *pension* where Phipps is — whatever's the name? She's a character, anyhow. And she knows how to take care of herself.

"I'll look up Phipps one of these nights; suggest a game of Bridge to him. A *mannequin.* Good Lord! And sent me packing like a duchess!"

They swung out into the glare of the open water; tiny waves caught the reflection of the sun, and the burnished sheet made him close his eyes, pulling his hat over his brows.

He could still see that figure of youth, demure yet provocative, artfully posed against the stones of a palace in heavy shadow; hear her voice, with its foreign

accent, faint yet distinctive, challenging, answer his mischievous "au revoir" with the definite word "good-bye."

It roused all his fighting instincts. He was in that mood of idleness when a chance encounter with a girl awakes anew in a man's mind the mystery of the opposite sex.

What could she be doing in Venice? Was she employed in a shop? Hardly; to be dawdling round the Piazzetta at that hour. Was she alone, unchaperoned? Or hiding an undesirable parent — a lover perhaps — at that withheld number? He stroked his chin reflectively.

"Anyway," he said to himself, "I've not done with you yet, my lady."

Under the lazy sensuous sun the affair had assumed undue proportions.

CHAPTER IX

"I'M so sorry to be late." Isoël apologized to the secretary on the threshold of the crowded dining-room, where the lunch was already in full swing. "But I went out and got lost."

"Yes, really? That often happens." Miss Flinders full of cares had no soul for adventure. With the macaroni overcooked and Miss East's Chianti missing! "This is your seat." She pulled out a chair between a withered elderly lady and a lanky girl with a pig-tail. "Stefanina!" She called the waitress, who between the meals was chambermaid, and ordered back the vanished course.

Isoël glanced about her. The company numbered twenty at most, seated on either side of a table that ran the whole length of the room and presided over by the "Signora" who gave her a solemn bow.

On the opposite side in the window were a pair alone, a stout lady with iron-grey hair and a "Royalty fringe," almost black, that lay on her brow in a pointed mat, very fuzzy, and a bent, wistful old gentleman with pale blue eyes and a white moustache.

Every one looked back at the girl with a hostile stare and the curious distrust that seems to centre round new-comers in the narrow confines of a *pension*. Isoël was further confused by a heaped-up plate of macaroni, mixed with a thick tomato sauce, slippery and hard to eat.

The talk, which had momentarily ceased, started again in undertones, dominated by a voice which rose steadily above it.

"As I was saying," the speaker resumed, "I have never heard a poorer attempt. You could not call it an Opera. There wasn't a single good singer."

Isoël, glancing down the table, saw on the Signora's right a matron, with a pair of daughters, steadily laying down the law. She had a sleek pussy-cat face, was well

dressed in a tailor-made gown with big pearls in her ears. Evidently a personage — at least, in her own estimation.

The place opposite her was vacant, but the visitor next to the empty chair, a pretty faded old creature, ventured a half-hearted protest.

"But, dear Mrs. Percival, I understood that Rosa Gratz was taking Santuzza's part? At least her name was on the bill."

"Was that the breathless peasant in pink who sang with a tremolo like a drum?" the elder daughter chimed in. She laughed, as she spoke, contemptuously.

Isoël, watching her narrowly, felt one of those sudden dislikes which are based on instinct rather than reason. Yet the girl was good-looking in her way, with her mother's crinkly, russet hair, a high colour, hot brown eyes and full discontented lips. Over-ripe, Isoël thought, and still attached to the parent tree.

"Yes. I did not care for her voice. And as for the tenor he was hopeless," Mrs. Percival decided. "I can't think where they find such people."

The pretty old neighbour refused to be crushed.

"I'm afraid it's a fact that in this country, which one always considers the *home* of song, artistes are shamefully underpaid. Isn't it so, *cara Signora?*" She appealed to the listening hostess.

That worthy, with tact, evaded the issue. She thought that Mrs. Percival had been unfortunate in the night. The companies varied from week to week.

Here the lady with the fringe at the side table entered the lists.

"I don't suppose it's any worse than we get in the provinces at home. Outside Leeds and Birmingham and a few of our larger towns where they hold annual festivals, there's no *real* music except in London."

Mrs. Percival raised her head with its plaited coronet of hair, once red, now a curious blend of granite and silver, aggressively.

"And what about Worcester?" Her voice was tart. "Perhaps Mrs. Brace has never been there." The tone suggested that the gates had been closed in the face of the Colonel's wife, banished for ever from Paradise.

"I've never stayed in the town itself," Mrs. Brace met

the attack. "But we've passed through it, haven't we, Jim? When we went to stay with the Ogilvy-Fishers."

"Yes, my dear," said her husband. He knew that his wife whom he adored had quietly scored and his old eyes twinkled.

They both disliked Mrs. Percival and called her in private "Worcester Sauce," with that tendency to invent nicknames which seems to flourish in boarding-houses.

Now the Ogilvy-Fishers were well-known people. Mrs. Percival had lived for many years within the Close and was assuredly of the "elect," the relict of a worthy Canon.

Mrs. Brace, smiling, resumed:

"I remember the Cathedral; not so fine as some I've seen, but picturesque, above the river. It must make the houses damp in winter when the floods are out. But then, after our life in the Hills, it always seems damp in England."

Like many Anglo-Indians she had forgotten the discomforts of the long years of exile from home, and sighed now for past glories. She belonged to a type of gentlewoman that risks becoming obsolete after a period of conscription; a staunch, narrow Army type that has helped to build up the Empire. She divided the world into two sections; those whose people were in the Service and the remainder— who hardly counted!

Isoël was much amused. She divined two factions in the house. Which should she side with, given the chance? The Army couple appealed to her more intimately than "the Close." Mrs. Percival's face suggested that her satellites would be catechized, and she mistrusted the pair of daughters, the rather striking, sulky girl and her mouse-coloured, demure sister.

Her thoughts here were interrupted by her neighbour's request for the salt.

"*Thenk* you."

The courtesy was acknowledged grudgingly. "Thus far and no further," said the acid glance accompanying it.

Isoël studied the prim profile for a moment in mock despair.

Human? Yes, in parts, she thought. All the rest

vegetable. She glanced at the girl on her left, who was eating as if she had never seen food before in her life.

Purely animal, she decided.

She cast about for fresh amusement. On the opposite side of the table a thin grave man, very shabby, was talking in French to his neighbour, a pale heavy individual with almond-shaped eyes and moist red lips protruding above an inky beard.

Later on she discovered that these were residents in the place, inhabiting two tiny rooms tucked away under the roof; a *pasteur* of the *Église reformée* and a Russian baron, who was supposed to be an outlawed anarchist! So much for local gossip. As a matter of fact they were equally harmless with one serious social offence: a poverty that nothing could hide.

Save at meals they never intruded their company on the establishment, but occasionally were invited alone to the Signora's little sanctum to "make music" and drink "sweet wine," the *pasteur* being a pianist of no mean calibre, and the Russian possessing a powerful voice.

But Isoël, unaware of their social ostracism, attracted by her mother tongue, felt drawn to the pair. Cheese, nuts and oranges were being handed round together and she saw that a basin of sugar stood close to the *pasteur's* glass. She made a little gesture towards it.

"May I give you the trouble?" she asked in French.

"*Mille pardons, mademoiselle.*" Courteously he proffered the bowl. His tired face lighted up as she went on with a little smile.

"But perhaps these oranges are sweet. Are they grown in Italy?"

Thus encouraged, the pair were led into a cross-fire of remarks. People glanced down the table surprised by the rapid flow of French.

Rosamund Percival nudged her mother.

"I thought the Signora said she was English, came from London?" Her lip curled. "More like a French actress!"

"Very bad style," said the Canon's widow. She rose, majestic, from the table. "Will you excuse us, Signora?

We have to make an early start for an expedition this afternoon."

There came an answering switch of skirts from the window recess. Colonel Brace, taken aback by this sudden move, choked over a piece of walnut, but, gallantly supporting his wife, hobbled across towards the door. Lame from an old Frontier wound, and suffering from rheumatism which had bent his once erect figure, he yet preserved his dignity.

The parties arrived simultaneously at the entrance to the drawing-room.

"Allow me," said the Colonel. He fumbled clumsily with the handle. "It gets stiffer every day." He added jocosely, "like myself!"

Isoël watched this simple manœuvre to give his wife the time she needed.

The two ladies glared at each other as the door opened.

"After you," said Mrs. Percival icily.

"Since you're so kind," said Mrs. Brace and sailed through, her head high. One up to the Army!

It was the signal for a move among the rest of the ladies. Those who turned to the *salone* seemed to have caught the infection of Mrs. Percival's earlier mood. Isoël, the last to follow, guessed the reason for their haste; one of those little jealousies that spread like a fungus in boarding-houses. For the arm-chairs were few in number and the elderly ladies vied with each other in maintaining their "right" to the best seats.

In a *bergère* by the window Mrs. Brace was enthroned, her knitting spread out on her lap. The Colonel sat facing her, buried in the *Weekly Times*.

She had a view of the canal, a draught in her neck and the subtle joy of seeing the Percival family ousted from their favourite corner.

But the Canon's relict was not to be slighted.

"Well, my dears—" She turned to her daughters—"we must be off. On a day like this, it's wrong to stay in a stuffy room. Except, of course, for invalids." Cruelly she included the Colonel, in her glance at the quiet pair. "And old people who need their nap." She brushed past Isoël as though she had been a gnat on her path. "I wonder where Mr. Phipps is to-day?

He isn't often out to lunch. I hope he'll be back for Bridge to-night. It's so *dull* here in the evenings!" Her clear, cold dogmatic voice seemed to roll over other chatter, crushing it, like a traction-engine smoothing out a pebbly road.

Isoël had slipped along to a little stool near the window and she heard the Colonel breathe to his wife:

"Exit Worcester Sauce."

The girl looked up and caught his eye and her lips curved with amusement. He gave her an old man's long, slow stare, full of dawning admiration. She felt that here was a kindred spirit, indulgent as kindly age is to youth. But Mrs. Brace became aware of her husband's attitude. She turned sideways in her chair and gave the stranger a shrewd glance.

Isoël, suddenly shy, coloured almost painfully. Had she known it, that swift hot flush was the passport to the other's heart. She drew still further into her corner and picked up a magazine.

"I'm sure you can't see there," said Mrs. Brace pleasantly. "If you pulled your chair nearer this way, you'd get the light from the window."

"Thanks," Isoël, smiled back, "But please don't move. I'm going out. I really don't want to read, I was only looking at the pictures."

"Then I wonder," said Mrs. Brace briskly, "if you'd just hold this skein of wool while I wind off a fresh ball? It tires the Colonel to keep up his hands."

"Of course." Isoël was delighted. She drew her little stool forward. "Is it war work — your knitting, I mean?"

"Yes, I'm making soldiers' helmets. Have you come straight out from England?"

Isoël nodded.

"Last night."

"Any fresh news?" asked the Colonel. "I suppose you haven't yesterday's paper. No — of course not! The day before?"

"Yes. Shall I fetch it? It's in my room." She saw the eager light in his eyes.

"My dear Jim, you can wait a minute. Until I've finished with this skein." Mrs. Brace decided the matter

by passing it over her victim's hands. Pretty hands with well-shaped nails and carefully tended, her sharp eyes noted. "There!" She began to wind the wool and having secured her prisoner, started to put her through her paces. "Did you come that long journey alone? I suppose you have friends in Venice."

"No." Isoël looked wistful. She saw the lady stiffen slightly and fell back on invention. "I'm quite by myself — so unfortunate! An old friend was coming with me but was taken ill, with influenza. It spoilt our plans and as every one's so busy now I couldn't get any one in her place. It seemed such a shame to waste the tickets and I've always longed to see Venice so I took my courage in both hands, hoping she would join me later."

She excused this quite unfounded story by a memory of Patty's cold! And certainly Patty couldn't have come. And wasn't she an "old friend"?

"I see." Mrs. Brace relaxed. She applied her unfailing test. "I suppose you're upset, like most of us at present by this dreadful war? With relations fighting at the Front?"

Here was a facer. Isoël trembled.

"No. Only friends so far. I've hardly a relative left; no brothers and no cousins! But of course if my father were still alive I should have been terribly anxious." She let the inference soak in and went on with a smile, "One minute! There's a knot."

Mrs. Brace wrestled with it and disentangled the erring wool. Their eyes met triumphantly.

Why, the girl was a beauty! With her lips parted in a smile and the glowing depths of her long-shaped eyes. She had no business to be alone and the older woman felt doubtful. She held strict notions on behaviour that dated from the Victorian era. Then she recalled that "terribly anxious."

"Your father was in the Army then?"

"No, the Navy." Isoël watched her.

Mrs. Brace's manner changed, no longer patronizing. Here was a new and pretty ally in her battle with the Percival faction.

She nodded her head vigorously.

"I understand. It's a bad time for the women at home. And for the men past active service too," she lowered her voice, very friendly. "That's why I got the Colonel away. He was eating his heart out in town. He'd tried in vain to get something to do. Of course in India it would have been easy. But one drops out of things at home after an absence of thirty years and his rheumatism is against him. Though they might have used his *experience*."

She shared in this steady grievance of his.

The Colonel had caught the last words.

"Experience? They don't want it. Any Jack in office will do. Look at that fellow Churchill now? A mere boy, directing the Navy! With Fisher placed upon the shelf! Upon my soul, they'll be saying next that Kitchener is past his work!" He was working himself into a fever. "Abominable! This Government is doing its best to lose the war. I believe they're half of them pro-Germans!"

He glared at his wife, his lips twitching.

"I shouldn't wonder." She humoured him. "But the country won't 'wait and see' for ever; and there's some of the old Army left."

By this odd form of consolation, she revealed the deep wound in her heart. For she knew that the old order had passed; life would never be the same.

This gallant new Army growing up, democratic to the core, spelt the death of the old régime, caste and tradition sorely threatened.

She had never recovered from the shock when her grocer's son had got his commission; a youth who had served her with rice and sugar and had been on her list of Christmas boxes. She belonged to the England of the past. She could not see that this era of change was to be the salvation of the nation, sweeping away the paralysis induced by the long years of peace.

Yet so mixed was her frame of mind that she gloried in the fine response of men in every station of life to the first breathless call to arms. Only, they should have been "sorted out," according to rank and not to merit, and the pressing needs of the hour. It wasn't fair on "Army women!"

She laid the finished ball of wool on her lap with a heavy sigh.

"Thank you, my dear." Absently she drove the long knitting needle into the fuzzy mat that lay in a point between her grey eyebrows and loosened the tight fringe net.

Isoël rose to her feet.

"I'll fetch that paper for—" She paused.

The elderly lady recovered herself.

"Colonel Brace." She filled the gap. "And what is your name? You haven't told me."

"Isoël Dark."

The Colonel, drowsy after his brief attack of spleen, indulged in a mild joke.

"It should be Fair, to my mind!" His eyes lingered on her hair.

"An instance of feminine perversity?" She gave him a sunny smile as she slipped away on her errand.

"A pretty girl," said the old man.

"Yes. I like her," said Mrs. Brace. "Though what her people are about letting her wander abroad like this with no one to look after her, I can't think. Perhaps it's *modern!*"

"But Maud travels by herself." He referred to an elderly niece of his.

"Maud!" she scoffed. "Now do you believe that *Maud* runs any danger?" She bent her head nearer his. "I'm only hoping"—her eyes twinkled—"that Phipps will take a fancy to her. It would serve Mrs. Percival right. She monopolizes that young man."

"Perhaps she intends him for Rosamund?"

"Not she! She likes to have some one always in attendance. That's why the girls look so sulky. Their mother never gives them a chance! Mrs. Fortescue, who met them last Winter, staying in Florence, told me it was just the same there with a Mr. Wyatt. There was a regular scene one night and the younger girl went into hysterics!"

"Oh, you gossips!" The Colonel laughed. "That's the worst of *pensions*. You get a pack of women together with a helpless minority of men and then there's the devil to pay! I should think that Miss Rosamund

could manage her own affairs. She's not really afraid of her mother. And after all —" he chuckled softly — "I remember that *you* were not averse to cavaliers in the old days. Half my boys were running errands or crowding in to tiffin with you — "

She interrupted, with sparkling eyes.

"But Minnie was first when she came out. I never stood in the child's light. I'd had my own happy girlhood and I meant that she should enjoy hers." Her face saddened suddenly. "She might have married half the station and then she chose poor Leslie! And we none of us guessed —"

The Colonel nodded.

"She says she's happy. Even now!"

A short silence fell between them. For their love had been closer knit by a grief shared but rarely alluded to, the sacrifice of a woman's youth.

Isoël recrossed the room, threading her way through the groups of chairs. The owners stared at her as she passed with curious looks, mostly hostile.

The old soldier noticed this. Stiffly he rose from his seat to take the paper she offered him.

"Thank you so much. Won't you take my place?"

She refused the attention prettily, adding:

"I'm going out to explore. You can't think how exciting it is. I've already been lost once to-day!"

"Take care then where you get to. Don't go wandering far on foot; you're safer in a gondola and you'll find the steam-boats very useful. If I were younger I'd come with you."

"*Do!*" She smiled across at his wife. "Would you trust him to my tender care?"

"No, I wouldn't!" Mrs. Brace rose to the joke. "Now, off you go! It gets chilly, later on. Oh, by the way, a word in your ear." The girl, obedient, bent over her chair. "If you would take a hint from me — as an older woman, since you're alone — I wouldn't get *too* friendly with your opposite neighbours at table. Of course you're young and you don't think. But those men are not desirable. One of them is an anarchist." She believed firmly in the report. "Of course the Russians are our allies —" Odd how the war had altered

things! Her thoughts flashed back to the Crimea. "But this Baron, as he calls himself, is a somewhat mysterious individual. The other man's a French *pasteur,* harmless but hardly a gentleman." She saw a question in Isoël's eyes. "Well?"

"A *pasteur,* not a priest?"

"No. Why?"

Isoël smiled.

"It sounded odd. I'm partly French and a Catholic like my mother was." She hesitated, rather shy and uncertain of her ground.

Mrs. Brace looked surprised. A rigid Protestant herself, she was yet beset by a mischievous pleasure. This girl might prove a severe thorn in the flesh to the Canon's widow!

"Well, I hope you don't mind my warning you?"

"*Au contraire!* I think you're most kind." Isoël spoke gratefully. "I've never been to a *pension* before and I must own"—she was laughing now—"that I found lunch rather a trial with deaf-mutes on either side! Still I studied a Mrs. Percival,"—this was a clever stroke!—"the lady with a granite crown slightly impaired by wind and weather! And I found her *quite* absorbing."

They laughed simultaneously.

"I'm afraid you're a quiz," said Mrs. Brace.

The girl made off, well pleased with herself.

"It's quite easy," she decided. "You've only to find a mutual hobby, or better still, a strong dislike and play upon it carefully. All the same they're a dear old pair. And what a lovely day it's been! Adventures at every turn. I wonder how Master Doran's feeling?"

As she danced out, still laughing, into the street now filled with shadows she met a man coming in, who stood aside for her to pass.

He stared at her eagerly and she carried away an impression of a cherubic clean-shaven face, and a chin with a deep cleft in it, a pair of mischievous blue eyes and a cigarette swiftly removed from a mouth shaped like a Cupid's bow.

Did he—*could* he belong to the *pension?* Here was material to her fancy.

CHAPTER X

TWO days passed swiftly, days of sunshine and fresh delight. Isoël seized the first chance of making friends with the "Signora," a wise move which resulted in a change of seats at the dinner table.

Now she was nearer to her hostess, with a Mrs. Fortescue on her right, a rather lymphatic but kindly lady who had known the Braces in India.

From here she could catch the merry glance of the blond young man from time to time. She learnt that his name was Stacy Phipps and that he hailed from London too. He belonged to a firm of solicitors well-known in Lincoln's Inn. He adhered to the Percival faction, hovered around the sleek matron and flirted behind that lady's back with Rosamund, the elder daughter.

They seemed to understand each other and to have a sort of secret code. But the girl chafed against the need of his public attentions to her mother. Isoël fancied that young Phipps took a mischievious pleasure in the fact, noting Rosamund's jealousy, and turning it to his own account. For the girl fluctuated between bold advances and sullen temper, and the sly mouse-coloured sister looked on, with a slightly aloof air of virtue.

It was a pretty comedy and nothing escaped Isoël's eyes. Beneath her half lowered lids she saw more than most people. Saw, too, that Stacy Phipps was searching cautiously for an excuse to make advances to herself without offending the Percivals.

Mrs. Brace gave him his chance. The opposite faction had sallied forth that evening in a gondola, taking advantage of the first warm night under the full moon. The satellite had politely declined their invitation on the pretext of letters to write; but, shortly after their departure, he sauntered into the drawing-room with a paper fresh from its postal wrapper which he offered to the Colonel.

"Do you care to read it? I hear there's been another big Zeppelin raid." For he knew the old man's pet weakness, an exile's hunger for home news.

"Thanks, I should." The Colonel rose from his place between Isoël and his wife. "I see there's a chair under the light." He hobbled off in that direction.

Phipps stood there, hesitating. Mrs. Brace smiled at him.

"You'd better take this one, while you can." She patted the vacant *bergère*. "It won't go begging very long."

Delighted, he sat down, with a sidelong glance at Isoël. She was bending over her needlework, a strip of lace just begun, joining the braids by a network of threads, her eyes lowered, the dark lashes sweeping the curves of her smooth young cheek.

"You're not having your Bridge to-night?" Mrs. Brace looked mischievous. "I quite miss the excitement of those *post mortem* arguments."

"*I* don't!" Phipps laughed. "That's the worst of a family party. Relationship encourages candour at games to an alarming extent. But one must do something to pass the time — and I'm not clever at my needle!" This was directed at Isoël.

She glanced up at the broad hint and Mrs. Brace introduced them.

"You don't know Miss Dark?"

"No." His glance spoke volumes.

Isoël, in a dainty blouse copied from one of Clotilde's models and cut sedately high at the throat, looked the picture of simple girlhood.

Mrs. Brace completed the formula briskly and rose to her feet.

"If you'll keep this chair for me, my dear, I just want to ask the Colonel —" Without finishing her speech she rustled away with the firm step of a woman sure of her position and indifferent to criticism.

A little silence fell upon the young couple left together.

Isoël, demure, stitched on, but a dimple in her cheek betrayed her.

"Doesn't that fine work try your eyes?" Phipps sug-

gested. As she denied it he added admiringly, "May I see it?" and held out his hand.

"Certainly." She ran the needle through the stiffening, point downwards, and gave it up into his care.

"You're interested in needlework?" she asked sweetly.

"Not in the least. But I think you've done enough for to-night. It would be kinder to talk to me."

Her eyes danced as she saw him fold it with gingerly care avoiding the sharp point.

"How tidy you are! And *how* careful! You don't mean to prick your fingers."

"No good rushing into danger. Unless it's worth it," he added, smiling.

She met him at his own game.

"It so rarely is. Life's too short."

"But I'd rather have it short and sweet. Wouldn't you?" It was a challenge.

For these two had much in common and knew it instinctively. She parried the thrust:

"I'm not sure. Here in Venice one wants to live forever. At least, *I* do."

"Live, yes; but not exist! I can't picture you for instance like that valetudinarian there." He made a slight inclination towards her old table neighbour, erect in a stiff-backed chair, a shawl drawn round her bony shoulders.

Isoël followed his glance.

"But she's not alive," she whispered gaily. For she could not resist the silent call of youth to youth, condemning age. "And the worst of it is she's a cannibal — feeds upon her own species."

"How?" He drew his chair closer. A faint perfume from her hair as she moved her head was wafted across him. He drank it in eagerly.

"She's a fervid vegetarian."

He laughed, with a ring of excitement that the joke hardly justified, delighted to find that this pretty girl had a sense of humour and did not belong to the "doll tribe" who consider good looks are all that a man requires.

"Capital! Feeds on nuts. I thought you meant she was a vampire."

"No — just an Artichoke!" She still spoke under her breath, aware that the lady in question was only a few feet away. "At least that's my name for her. Those green ones you know, with spiky leaves. If she has a heart, which I very much doubt, it's guarded by tight rows of prickles. Her little fat friend is the 'Brussel's Sprout,' and the girl with the pigtail I call the 'Carrot.'"

"I wonder what you've christened me?"

She glanced at him and hesitated.

"I hope I'm not in the green food line?"

"No. But I'm not going to tell you."

"*Do.* I promise I'll forgive you. Besides I'm hoping it's something nice."

She shook her head provokingly.

"I don't know you well enough."

"Heavens! If that's all that matters, we'll soon —"

But she checked him, drawing back.

"It's quite useless, Mr. Phipps. I've told you enough secrets already! Will you please return my property?"

"Never! I'll keep it as a ransom. And I hate to see people energetic — even when they've pretty hands. What do you call Mrs. Percival?"

But she disapproved of this treachery.

"I thought she was a friend of yours." Her words were delicately edged.

"How severe!" He gave a chuckle. "So she is — in a sort of way. A kind creature. All the same —" he shrugged his shoulders —"It's only a game. I should like to hear your summing-up."

Before she could answer, the door opened and the hall-porter crossed to their side, a visiting card outstretched between a grimy finger and thumb.

"One asks for you, Signore," he said.

Phipps scowled.

"Where is he?"

"Downstairs. I go, fetch?" He glanced sideways at Isoël with an Italian's love of beauty. His eyes wandered down to her feet. He wondered if the Signorina

had noticed how well her shoes were polished? He lingered daily over this pleasant task to the neglect of the solid footwear of most of the other visitors — out of all proportion to the sizes!

Phipps's face revealed plainly that he resented the interruption.

"Yes. Show him in." He turned to the girl as the porter retreated. "What a bother! You *must* tell me that nickname now or I shall stay awake all night."

"But you mightn't sleep if you heard it." She warned him with a mischievous smile.

"I'll risk that! *Do* tell me?"

She lowered her voice mysteriously.

"I call her 'The Impregnable City.'"

"Ha, ha!" His laugh rang out. "And you thought that would drive me to despair? Whatever made you choose such a title?"

"Her granite battlements," she explained. "But perhaps you haven't noticed her hair? It's piled in little red-grey plaits like a firmly built castle wall. Besides —" She stopped, catching her breath and stared over Phipps's shoulder.

A tall man was coming towards them, broad-chested and black-haired, his grey eyes scanning the pair under the ridge of his dark brows.

"Hullo, Doran!" Phipps sprang up. "Excuse me, Miss Dark." He moved forward to check his friend's nearer approach. He did not intend to introduce him to this fascinating new acquaintance and to see her quickly monopolized — as she certainly would be! — by the soldier.

But Doran, true to his creed of life, recognized no obstacles. He nodded cheerily in response.

"How're you? Why, there's Miss Dark! Luck, finding you both together." And bore on steadily until he reached Isoël's side.

"You've not forgotten me, I hope?"

She gave him a cool little nod.

"No. I remember you quite well — now." The pause was intentional. For she had herself in hand again after the first swift surprise.

"Am I stealing your chair, Stacy?" he asked, laying

a hand on the back of it with a proprietary gesture.

"Yes, you are! But I'll forgive you." Phipps drew up a rickety stool and sat there like a small boy doing unwilling penance. "Nice of you to look me up. You're looking uncommonly fit, I think."

"I'm cured." Doran smiled slowly. "By a miracle. They happen in Venice. It's a wonderful place for adventures. Haven't you found it so, Miss Dark?"

Phipps gazed from one to the other. He was surprised at their acquaintance. Old Doran was deuced deep! He'd never so much as mentioned the girl. He listened to Isoël's reply.

"Yes. A *pension* in itself is a sort of adventure, isn't it? Rather like a bran-pie. You never know what you may find," she added with a faint scorn, "hidden away in the saw-dust."

"Nice for me," said Phipps, laughing.

"Oh, there's always a plum," Doran consoled him.

"And a pie-crust," suggested Phipps to Isoël. "Battlemented!"

They both of them were amused at this reminder of earlier chaff. Doran watched them, interested. Trust old Stacy to lose no chance!

As the talk threatened to leave him out, he protested:

"D'you call this fair on me? These hidden jests. And you haven't shown much interest in my miracle."

He looked at Isoël wickedly. She guessed his game. He was going to relate in veiled language how he had met a ministering angel!

Rapidly she began to talk.

"That reminds me! I had a letter this morning from an old friend whose hobby is Italian art and he asked if I had seen some frescoes by Carpaccio of St. George and the Dragon. You're an authority on Venice, aren't you, Mr. Doran?" Her face was almost too innocent. "Can you tell me where they are?"

"I can. San Giorgio degli Schiavoni. It's a guild chapel hidden away behind the *riva* of that name. It's rather difficult to find. You'd better take a gondola. It wouldn't do for you to get lost." He underlined the last phrase.

"Come with me," said Phipps quickly.

She was relieved at this juncture to see Mrs. Brace leave the Colonel and rustle back across the room. In her black dress, trimmed with jet, with the little window under her chin showing the folds of her plump neck and a large pendant in blue enamel set round with tiny brilliants, she looked a bulwark of defiance, motherly yet imposing.

"We've kept your chair."

Isoël rose, her action followed by the others. Mrs. Brace glanced at the stranger.

"These young men," she said to herself, "moths round my pretty candle."

Phipps introduced Doran, and the Colonel, attracted, joined the group, widening the little circle. He was always relieved to see other men in the feminine atmosphere of the place.

He began to discuss the war news with his fellow-soldier, whilst Mrs. Brace listened complacently, and Phipps flirted with Isoël.

Every now and then she caught Doran's grey eyes upon her. He was wondering if this elderly pair were chaperoning the girl he admired. He laid himself out to be attentive.

"You don't know my hotel?" The talk had drifted back to Venice. "It's about the oldest, I suppose. I've stayed there before so it feels homey and you get the air straight off the sea, which suits me just now."

Mrs. Brace chimed in.

"You must have a lovely view?"

"Yes. I was fortunate in securing a sitting-room in the front. The sunsets are very fine." He hesitated, then went on. "If ever you're passing that way at tea-time, you and Miss Dark, would you care to come in? I should feel so flattered." He smiled at her, strong white teeth visible, his dark, rather lean, face transformed by a hint of boyishness.

Mrs. Brace nodded back with the air of a conspirator. She knew exactly why she was asked and enjoyed the position thoroughly.

"It's very kind of you, Mr. Doran." Her voice was formal, her eyes twinkled. "We certainly will, one fine day, when we are in your direction."

She did not refer the invitation to the girl herself and Doran thought that this proved his surmise. He felt all the more puzzled. If she were travelling with the Braces, so eminently presentable, why had she made such a mystery of her address at their first meeting? And how did a *mannequin* from Clotilde's find herself *dans cette galère?* Some instinct had warned him that Isoël was not of his own class. He glanced at her. She was chaffing Phipps, who was quite contented to leave his guest to the tender mercy of the Braces.

The door of the room opened softly. Rosamund Percival peeped through with a smiling face which changed swiftly. She gave the group an angry stare; then, imperiously, beckoned to Phipps.

"I think you're wanted," said Isoël sweetly.

Phipps frowned but got up.

"I'm coming back." He nodded to Doran, avoiding the mischief in Isoël's eyes.

As he reached the intruder she said clearly:

"I have a message for you from Mother," and drew back into the passage. Phipps closed the door behind him but not before the first words of the irate Miss Percival drifted across to the others: "What on earth are you —"

Isoël smiled, with intention, at Mrs. Brace.

"Poor Mr. Phipps," said the latter suavely. "He's always so much in request."

Doran, amused by the incident, began to talk about his friend.

"I've known Stacy since my school-days — the 'Cherub,' as we used to call him! But the fellows soon left him alone. He was so good-natured, every one liked him. I should imagine him to be a godsend in a *pension.*" A slight dryness was in his voice and the Colonel chuckled, understanding. Doran turned to Isoël.

"About San Giorgio," he said lightly. "You ought to go there in the morning. Eleven o'clock's the best light. It's a dark little place and it's difficult to make out the pictures later on. That's one of the drawbacks to Venice, the perverse way in which they hide their

best works in the gloomiest corners. Have you been to the Doge's palace yet?"

"No. I like to keep out in the sunshine. It's so delicious after town." She had retrieved her strip of lace and was busy, making minute stitches.

"And Murano?"

He had his reward. A faint colour warmed her cheek.

"Not yet."

Doran smiled.

"But you're still, I hope, in love with Venice?" He did not wait for her reply but continued, looking at Mrs. Brace, "I was born here, so I'm prejudiced. Every one must love the place!"

"Really? But you're English, of course. Your name is quite familiar to me. I wonder by chance if you're any relation to a friend of my sister's I used to meet years ago at their place in Scotland. She was a Lady Caroline Doran, a daughter, I think, of Lord Garth."

"Yes, my mother." His voice was grave.

"She was very lovely," said Mrs. Brace.

Isoël, bending over her task felt a thrill of silent wonder, followed by a touch of triumph. This was the man whom she had snubbed!

Well — and hadn't it succeeded?

Here he was, seeking her out. She had guessed that this unexpected call on Phipps was partly due to her presence.

She felt his eyes return to her and linger curiously for a space, and she gloried in her sense of power with that spice of cruelty which seems to be part of the armour of a maiden before the insidious approach of passion.

Men, she thought, were all the same; even to that old wretch, "Monsieur!" Evade them and they pursued. It stung her anew to rebellion.

She folded her work neatly together and stood up as Phipps returned, a trifle heated from his lecture and determined to show how little he cared.

"Good night, Mrs. Brace." She held out her hand to the chaperon.

"You off, my dear?" said that motherly soul. "Are you feeling tired?"

"Only sleepy," she explained. "From the fresh air. I've been out all day."

Doran stood up.

"Good night, Miss Dark. Don't forget about the pictures. I think you'll like those fairy stories if you catch them in a good light."

"I shall go there to-morrow morning." She smiled. "Thank you for all your instructions."

She felt his hand tighten on hers. It *was* an assignation then! She met his keen grey eyes demurely and turned for a laughing nod to Phipps.

But once safely outside the door she gave a little skip of joy.

"And you can look for me, *mon cher*, and wait the live-long day, if you choose! Did you think you had only to lift a finger to find me flying after you?"

She reached her room and lit the candles. Placing one on either hand she stood before the unstable mirror studying her excited face.

Was she fascinating? Yes. It was hardly vanity that moved her, but a curious sense of indebtedness to the fair image confronting her. Together they would conquer fate!

She loosened the hair round her temples with her slim fine fingers and laughed again. Then, with a childish impulse, stooped and kissed the cold lips in the glass.

CHAPTER XI

THE sacristan of that tiny chapel built in the sixteenth century on the site of an ancient meeting-house for Slavonian sailors trading with Venice, wondered why a tall young man, who spoke to him in fluent Italian, but was obviously a *forestiere,* haunted San Giorgio.

An artist? Hardly. He had not the stamp of the fraternity in Venice; and although he examined the famous pictures he lacked the absorption of the expert.

Old Pietro, inquisitive, would pocket his tip after due parley and stroll out with a worn broom to sweep the immaculate church steps; an excuse to get into conversation with the gondolier lounging there.

It was a private gondola hired by Doran from week to week, and the man was dressed more soberly than his picturesque associates.

He learnt from this expansive worthy that: "Here was a great English *Signore.*" Rich?

"*Ma. . . . !*"

The long slow shrug of the Italian, lazier far than the nervous gesture that hails from France, hinted at wealth beyond expression. With a suite of rooms at Danieli's, where the manager showed him every attention.

He had come there ill, with a wound, from the war. Here the two heads drew nearer, and the voices sank.

"*Si, la guerra!*"

The boatman's clenched fist shot up and threatened the far-off range of hills beyond which lay Austria, with a centuries-old undying hatred.

"*Che sarà sarà!*" He himself prayed each night that a day might dawn for Italy. The Day — that word which never again will lose its bloody significance.

They talked politics awhile, then old Pietro craftily insinuated that the Signore was of a religious cast of mind.

"He? *Giammai!*" The gondolier spat into the shining water. Anti-clerical to the core he resented this slight on his new master.

"*Ebbene, ebbene.*" The old man soothed him. "It is the pictures that brings him them? For, look you, this is the third day he visits San Giorgio."

The boatman sought for an excuse and fell back on the usual one.

"He comes, without doubt, to meet a lady."

Churches all over Italy are favourite haunts as rendezvous illegal and authorized. For here the youth singled out for betrothal lingers on the steps for the first glance at his intended, supported by his chosen friends, who discuss her charms and possibilities with a frankness unknown in northern lands.

Pietro accepted this explanation with eagerness and pressed for details, glancing back over his shoulder.

The doorway showed no signs of life. Doran had settled down on a chair in a spot where a pale ray of sunshine pierced the gloomy little room. His face was grim, his mouth set. His obstinacy was of the kind that hardens when luck is out. He vowed he would come there every day until he forced a meeting upon the girl who evaded him, haunt the *rio* where she lived and, failing all other manœuvres, remove bodily to the *pension*.

This last horrific expedient made him smile against his will.

"The little jade!"

Upon the thought she came, smiling, into the church.

Behind her, officious, broom in hand, Pietro followed, his wrinkled face, like an ancient terrapin's, thrust out between his hunched shoulders.

Doran heard the light step and the rustle of her petticoat. But he did not turn. He still leaned forward gazing at the tiny altar.

Isoël, aware of his presence, paused before the left wall. Here was St. George, attacking the dragon with a spear a third the length of the picture; the maiden, prayerful, looking on and, grotesque beneath the hoofs of his charger, the legs and arms of earlier victims — "crumbs from the rich man's table"! In the background a faery city, with minarets and balconies alive with interested spectators, towered up to the radiant sky. The exquisite fantasy held her absorbed, though half of her senses were centred round the man on the chair beyond.

Slowly she moved to the next scenes; the dragon vanquished by St. George and his baptism of the King and his daughter.

An odd feeling of annoyance tempered her enthusiasm. Had it not been for that silent presence, she felt that Carpaccio's playful genius would have roused in her deep delight. The two sides of her character, that vivid imagination which sought ever for beauty and romance, and the shrewd material call of ambition, warred with each other provokingly.

Her nerves were tense with the conflict. When she heard Doran's chair pushed back with a grating noise she felt a sudden impulse to fly. Why had she come there and risked the meeting? Had she lowered her flag of pride? The colours danced before her vision, the wooden ceiling pressed down on her. She bit her lip, her eyes fixed upon a dog — that hall-mark of the artist which creeps into his various paintings like a child's grimace at religion — with a sudden nervous dread of faintness.

Doran now was standing behind her. Instinctively she put up her hand to the back of her head and smoothed her hair.

"It's quite tidy." His voice was grave; not so his face when she turned.

"Oh — Mr. Doran!" She tried in vain to meet the laughter in his eyes, the little flicker of triumph in them. "What a habit you have of springing up in the most unlikely places!"

"Unlikely?" He smiled back. "I come here every morning. It's a rule of mine; didn't you know? It's part of my duties as a guide. One must learn Carpaccio by heart."

Her fair skin had betrayed her as she listened to this mischievous speech. He saw that slow enveloping blush, and he felt suddenly sorry for her. Here was a new Isoël who appealed to him in her moment of weakness. He looked aside with a generous instinct.

"Come and see the Basilisk — if you think it's safe. I suppose you know that a glance from his eyes is generally fatal? But San Trifonio may protect us." He led the way, talking lightly, his voice lowered to suit the environment.

"I'm awfully glad to have the chance of showing it you. I am, really."

She began to feel more at home. A long strand of greenish tulle that she had wound round her neck, to relieve the sombre serge of her dress, caught on a chair-back as she passed.

Doran came to her assistance.

"That's his evil influence! He can't slay you with a look, like the heroine does in a popular novel, so he falls back on Absalom's game. I can sympathize. Half an hour ago I was feeling suicidal myself."

She frowned at his quick relapse from his more respectful manner.

Watching her face, on which the moods were so clearly reflected, Doran smiled.

"All right. Let's cry pax!"

"Why? I don't understand." She looked at him haughtily.

"Don't you?" He still held the disentangled end of her scarf. "Then I'll explain — as well as I can. I'll forgive you for leading me such a dance, if you'll be nice to me now you're here. That's putting the case boldly. Unless, of course, you really dislike me?" His voice changed on the last word with an accent of sincerity and chagrin that pierced her guard.

"Oh, no!" Impulsively, her foreign accent very apparent, she ran on: "It's not that. But I hardly know you and I feel"— she threw out her hands with a helpless gesture —"you're always making fun of me."

It was not at all what she had planned but Nature had tripped her up. Doran answered with equal candour.

"Heaven forbid! I don't mean to. It's a bad habit of mine, to tease. Besides, you hold the master cards. I'm simply longing to be friends, as the children say, but you won't agree."

A party of strangers entered the Chapel, forbidding further conversation of a private nature. Pietro, an Italian, had not counted, but these people spoke English. Doran gave her a searching look, then led the way to the famous picture.

"What do you think of it?" he asked.

She lifted her sombre eyes.

Again across her perturbed mood came that sense of peace which beauty brings.

For a moment she did not answer him, drinking in the quaint conception.

Save for the halo round the head of the Child-saint with his rapt expression, the painting held no note of religion but suggested to her an illustration of a story by Hans Andersen.

The amazing animal that faced little San Trifonio brought a smile to her serious lips.

"But what is it?"

"A Basilisk. On the very best authority. Would you like to have one for a pet?"

"Immensely! Isn't it chic?"

"A nice thing to tuck into your muff when you start out for a morning's shopping."

Isoël laughed beneath her breath. The reaction had set in with the sense of safety assured by the presence of other people.

"Could I keep it at the *pension?*"

"It might make you unpopular."

"Oh, I'm that now," she confessed gaily.

For, ever since the fatal evening when Rosamund had discovered Phipps siding with the enemy, she had missed no single opportunity of making trouble for Isoël.

Phipps had not helped matters. He had thrown off his allegiance, annoyed by Rosamund's tirade which had opened his eyes to the danger of a too desperate flirtation. He still hovered about the parent but was less assiduous than before, making the casual excuses of youth that finds better sport elsewhere. He had offered to teach Isoël chess, slyly encouraged by Mrs. Brace, and the first lesson overnight had broken the long sequence of Bridge.

But the pupil had felt a passing doubt as to the wisdom of the move. Could she afford enemies? She had learnt, too, that Phipps was poor.

Nothing to be gained there save the fun of a flirtation. And Doran? An enigma. Well-connected — this she knew — and staying at a good hotel. But men home on sick leave generally spent recklessly. She wasn't sure that she liked him. His manner irritated her. She had

never met a man before who refused to be snubbed with such mischievous skill.

"Perhaps Mrs. Brace is too severe?" He referred to her last remark. "I didn't gather. Is she your aunt?"

"My aunt?" Isoël stared at him. "Why, I only met her at the *pension*."

"Oh!" He was feeling his way. "I thought perhaps you were travelling with her."

"No. I'm there quite alone." She went on, rather hurriedly, "the friend who was coming out with me was taken ill. Such a pity."

"I see." He tried a fresh tack. "So you're having a holiday on your own, glad to get out of the London fogs."

"Yes." It did not occur to her that she had not told him where she lived. "I shall carry back a store of sunshine to help me through my munition work."

"Bravo! Are you taking that up?" He looked at her with fresh interest. "I expect you'll like it better than—" He pulled himself up just in time and substituted hastily, "playing the usual social round."

His face was grave. She did not guess he was choking down an impulse of laughter.

"Yes, one does tire of it," she admitted airily.

Doran gave an odd little cough, the result of his inward struggle.

She looked up anxiously, remembering that ominous sound.

"Isn't it rather chilly here? You oughtn't to stay in this cold place."

"Oh, I'm all right." He felt ashamed. "Still it's nicer outside this weather. But have you seen all you came for?"

He had meant it quite innocently, but a hidden meaning struck them both, at the same moment. Their eyes met and Doran accepting the situation added with a mischevious smile:

"*I've* seen the prettiest picture in Venice! And you?"

"The Basilisk," she laughed. "And I'm still alive!"

"Then let's go out into the sun and thank the saints."

They moved together to the door before the chattering group of tourists, the sacristan in their wake.

"This is better, isn't it?" He paused, dazzled by the light. "Come for a turn in my gondola? You owe that to the patient guide. I've been here three mornings running on the chance of a word with you. And one can't talk properly in a church."

Isoël realized that a fresh refusal might risk now the severance of their new friendship. This was the moment to be gracious.

"It's very tempting. I feel so lazy." She stepped down into the boat.

As the young couple seated themselves and Doran tipped the sacristan, he did not guess that behind his back the gondolier had made a gesture of blowing a kiss to the blue sky. He approved of his master's choice.

Pietro, as the boat moved off, responded to this pantomime with the keen interest of his race in a love intrigue. He blessed the pair: "*Buona fortuna* — and many babes!" Then slowly re-entered the church to keep an eye on the party inside and exchange art-knowledge for macaroni.

Isoël unfurled her sunshade. It was in that tender shade of green to be found in young lily leaves, matching the tulle round her white throat.

Doran studied the effect.

"You look more like a flower than ever. No, it's not a compliment and you needn't start at once to snub me! I'm simply — a lover of Nature. But I can't think what flower it is. Ah — I've got it! The Evening Primrose. You know those subtle scented things that only unfold their petals at night?"

"Yes. But this is broad sunshine."

"That's why you're furling your leaves above it." He laughed with a boyish ring. "It adds to the mystery, your Gallic instincts coming in. Women are so obvious, as a rule. I mean the pretty ones. They drive their beauty home to you, with all their wares in the front window!" He smiled down at her lazily. "But you're wiser. You hold reserves. What's the key to the enigma?"

"Imagination," she suggested. "A man finds what

he looks for. And an Englishman is too lazy to probe far beneath the surface. He takes the world at its face value."

"Why speak so scornfully? You're English yourself on your father's side."

He watched her, interested, as they rocked along through narrow waters. The soft music of the oar and the faint echo of ripples that splashed against the sides of the gondola soothed her into a reverie. Her eyes, half-closed, looked dreamily out on the long vista of shadowing houses that leant confidentially over the stream, whispering secrets of ancient stones.

"I don't feel English at all in Venice," she said at last, with a happy sigh. "I feel as if I'd come home again after a long and stormy voyage. You see I lived in the South for years, all my childhood. I suppose it's in one's blood, the love of the sun," her voice sank, "and the sense of freedom and idle hours."

"You're right." He entered into her mood. "It calls one back. I feel that too. Would you like to see my old home?"

"I should."

He turned to the gondolier. She listened to his fluent order.

"I wish that I could speak Italian. It's so musical; nothing jars."

"Wait till you hear them quarrelling." Doran suddenly drew himself up in the deep well of the boat. "How odd! Look there!" He pointed before them with a hand well-shaped but deeply scarred.

Isoél noticed this and wondered.

They had come to a narrow *fondamenta* where stood a row of humble shops that ended in a restaurant. It was at this that Doran stared.

"There must have been an awful row!"

For the place was gutted. Broken chairs and marble tops off the twisted tables littered the entrance; jagged splinters showed where the frame had once held glass. A pair of tall *Guarde civile* paced outside with a martial swagger in their gay plumed hats and white gloves, keeping, too late, law and order.

Doran questioned the gondolier. The man replied

volubly, with vivid gesture, his swarthy face lit up with a fierce joy.

Isoël, turning sideways, tried to follow the dialogue. Again she saw the hard alertness replace Doran's leisurely manner, the keen insistence of his glance. He looked every inch a soldier.

"*Basta!*" He checked the man and turned to explain to his companion. "It's as I thought — a sign of the times. The *padrone* was an Austrian. He boasted about the Russian set-back last night when the place was full and a painter from Moscow got up and harangued the mob. They set to and wrecked the café. I think Italy's coming in. It only needs a slender excuse. The spark's there smouldering and D'Annunzio is fanning it. He voices the hopes of the patriots. There's something Homeric about a poet singing the nation to war."

"Splendid!" Her eyes shone. "Will it come suddenly, do you think?"

"*Chi lo sa?*" He shrugged his shoulders, relapsing into a lazier mood. "You may wake up one fine night and find the Austrians bombarding Venice; big guns out at sea and hydroplanes in the lagoons. Bombs falling. Would you be scared?"

"I don't think so. Not at first. It would be too wonderful and exciting. Besides —" she laughed — "there's always the train."

"Not if they blew up the bridge to Mestre. I should come for you in a gondola, and we'd steal down behind the sand-banks, dodging the moonlight in the reeds until we reached Chioggia. Would you trust yourself to me?"

"Yes, then." Her voice was dreamy. She was lost in that vision of the night, love and death hand in hand, out on the last great adventure.

"Why 'then'?" he prompted softly.

"An English soldier," she said simply, without further explanation.

"Ah, you're not a foreigner now. There spoke the true Briton. Socially we're a failure; we don't 'look beneath the surface.' But when it comes to a tight corner our honour's good enough for you."

She liked him for this little outburst.

"I never suggested that it wasn't."

"Yet you won't come with me to Murano? No, that's unfair. I take it back." He was watching her narrowly.

"Is that a test?" she parried, smiling.

"No — yes! You mean you'll come?" His voice was eager. Unconsciously he moved a little nearer her. All memory of that scene at Clotilde's and the secret he held had passed from his mind. He was playing a deeper game than he knew; one as old as the world itself.

"Very well. I give in!" She lowered her parasol as they came to a bridge so near the water that the gondolier bent double. As they slipped into the cool shadows, Doran laid his hand on hers.

"You're a *dear!*" He whispered the words, his lips close to her shining hair. She lay quite still beneath his touch, wise in her instinct of non-resistance.

"Are you trying to make me regret it already?" Her voice was cool, with a trace of disdain.

Stung, he drew away from her.

"Sorry." The word was jerked out.

She did not feel so calm as she looked. This playing with fire was perilous. But, oh, what a glorious game it was! She exulted in her new-found power.

A little silence fell between them. They emerged into the Grand Canal and she gazed up at the fine Palazzo Corner della Cà Grande.

"About that miracle?" she asked, anxious to break the spell. "Are you really cured?"

He nodded his head.

"I haven't had a bad attack since the day you were so kind to me. By the way, talking of miracles, one happened on this very spot. A quaint one, concerning a child. You see I've remembered my duty as guide."

"Tell me." Isoël smiled.

Thus encouraged he launched out.

"There was once a little Venetian countess, heiress to a great fortune, but so devout that her parents feared she might end by becoming a nun. She used to worship every day in the church of San Vio across the canal,

and at last they forbade the gondoliers to ferry her to her heart's desire. The little maid was all forlorn. She came down to the water's edge and prayed to the Saints for inspiration. Then she spread her pinafore on the waves, stepped securely on to it and sailed across to the other shore! Isn't that a pretty fable?"

She nodded her head thoughtfully.

"But it's *true,* isn't it?" she asked.

"To those who believe in miracles. Do you?" Doran was amused.

"It's part of my faith. I'm a Catholic."

"Then the little Contessa Tagliapietra's action seems nothing out of the common?"

"Well—" She smiled at his wondering glance—"I don't expect it happens often."

He changed the subject tactfully.

"Do you see that *palazzo*—the third from here—with the finely carved balconies? That's where I first saw the light. We lived there for ten years." He sighed as he finished the phrase. "On and off—a jolly time! You can imagine the fine games I played pretending I was a pirate!"

"Quite. I should think you simply loved it." To herself she added, "They *must* have been rich. And his father is dead?"

She gave a start as the midday gun went off with a deep vibrating note.

"*Mezzo-giorno!*" He looked at his watch. "What time do you lunch?"

"Now," she laughed. "Will you put me down at that landing-stage. I can get home by a short cut." She pointed towards the Accademia.

"But why shouldn't I take you direct?"

"No." She had her own reasons.

Perhaps he guessed them for he smiled.

"And Murano? What about to-morrow?" She thought for a moment before replying. He watched her face with growing concern. "You're never going to back out of it now?"

She shook her head.

"I was thinking of plans. You see, I promised Mr. Phipps—"

This was pure imagination but it answered its purpose. Doran scowled.

"Oh, bother Phipps! You knew me first."

"By a few hours." She conceded sweetly. "Yes, to-morrow will do, if it's fine. I can go out with him in the morning to see that old curiosity shop. I'll meet you here at two o'clock. Will that suit you?"

They drew up at the steps.

"Splendidly." He helped her out. "You won't forget? If you do, I'll come round and murder Phipps or kidnap him and pack him off to do his duty at the Front."

"Why doesn't he?" she asked quickly.

"I think he'd like to." He played fair. "But there's opposition from the firm. He's articled to his uncles, and I fancy that they're short-handed."

"Then why is he here, holidaying?"

"I can't tell you." His voice was dry.

She held out her hand without further comment.

"Au revoir, and many thanks."

"*Good-bye!*" Doran laughed. "Isn't that the correct response? You see, I've a good memory."

"Too good!" she flung back.

He watched her cross the sunny square with that faint foreign swing of the hips, and vanish without further sign round the corner into the shadows.

Aware of his waiting gondolier, he stepped back into the boat.

"*A casa.*" His voice was grim. He felt restless and impatient. For deep down in his heart was the knowledge that a man's folly is better stopped at the outset. Yet he hankered for the full adventure. He passed a crowded gondola with a pretty brunette who glanced back and this revived his drooping spirits.

"Well I'm in for it now," he thought. "But the game's quite worth the candle!"

CHAPTER XII

PHIPPS sat at a marble table in the front row of *Florian's* enjoying an *apéritif* and watching the crowd feed the pigeons. He had singled out a fair head under a wide-brimmed sailor hat and a slender figure with rounded curves in a dark serge dress that was backing towards him.

Pigeons circled wildly about her.

"*Viens, petit!*" She stretched out her hand, where the grains of corn caught the light and stood, rigid, as a bird settled fluttering on her wrist.

He was sure now. It was Isoël Dark.

Two more with a whirr of wings followed the first pigeon's example; another preened itself on her shoulder. He could catch her profile, lips parted with the eager pleasure of the moment.

Two men brushed past her and the pigeons scattered in a flash. She gave a gesture of impatience and, seeing her unwanted neighbours had paused to look back at her, she threw the remainder of the grain into the air and beat a retreat.

Phipps rose and checked this manœuvre.

"Miss Dark!" His merry voice reached her, and she turned round.

"Good morning." She was glad to see a friendly face in the crowd. "I've been feeding the pigeons. Aren't they dears?"

"Who wouldn't be, with the chances they have? Fancy eating out of your hands! Come and drink out of mine. I'm only speaking figuratively."

She could not resist his sunny humour.

"At this hour in the morning?"

"Why, dear lady, it's *the* hour. Breakfast appears to have been a dream and lunch is a doubtful possibility. All nature cries *vermouth*. Here we are! Take this

chair. Now then, what shall it be? 'One of Torino,' or a syrup?"

"What does that taste like?" She looked at his glass.

"Nectar — with a dash of quinine! It's ordered by all the best doctors. Keeps off malaria and spotted fever, and hopeless love — so I'm told!"

"Dare I? Will it go to my head?"

"Never!" He called the waiter promptly. "*Anche uno,*" he brought out.

"Yessir," said the man gravely.

Isoël laughed.

"You're getting on. Even the natives understand you. How very smart we are to-day!"

For Phipps was resplendent in new grey flannels, a deep blue tie that matched his eyes and a rakish-looking panama drawn down over his chubby face.

"I came out to conquer Venice."

"Any success?" She was flippant.

"Yes, now." He raised his glass. "To those *belli occhi.* Is that right?"

"Don't ask me. I've only begun to take lessons in the language."

"And is our V.C. a good teacher?"

She looked at him with open surprise.

"I don't understand. Who do you mean?"

"Oh, ye little stars and fishes! Doran, of course — the *preux chevalier* — yes, I can speak French as well — why pretend that you didn't know?"

"It's the honest truth. I hadn't heard." The colour had warmed her pretty face. "Is he *really* a V.C.? How did he get it?"

Phipps chuckled.

"Ask him. He'll be so pleased."

But she saw through his little trick.

"I shall tell him you were my informant."

"For heaven's sake, don't! He'd half-kill me. Doran's a rum chap. Though I like him," he added quickly. "We were at school together, you know. St. Paul's. After he left Eton."

"Left Eton?" She raised her brows.

"Had to; when the smash came. Hard lines on a

chap who'd been brought up to expect his path smoothed for him everywhere; Eton, Sandhurst and the Guards! I shouldn't have had the pluck myself."

"Explain these mysteries to me?" She lifted the glass the waiter had brought and took a sip doubtfully.

"Like it?" He watched her, amused.

"I think I shall. In time," she laughed.

"After we've finished the bottle between us? Picture the scandal! Arm in arm, rolling home to the *pension*. Look here, have a syrup?"

"No. Please go on with your story." Bravely she tried the *vermouth* again. "It grows on one," she decided.

"Like a fungus!" Phipps suggested. "Don't blame me if you get the habit. Well, let me see — where was I? Singing the praises of my rival." He gave her a pathetic glance. "What do I get out of this?"

"Chess, to-night," she said promptly.

"Good. I'm on!" He sobered down. "Did you never hear, by chance, of the famous Lady Caroline?"

"No. You mean our friend's mother?"

He nodded his head. "Between ourselves she was a bit—well, you know! The Garths are all pretty rapid. She was engaged to Spencer Peel but threw him over for David Doran, quite an unknown man at the time, a young painter, living in Venice. *Would* do it! Nothing would stop her. Head over heels in love with him. To every one's great surprise the curious match seemed a success. Doran worshipped the ground she trod on. I had the story from my uncle who was a friend of Lord Garth's agent.

"They'd three children, two girls and a boy, and after ten years abroad — for she'd quarrelled with her family — they went home for their education.

"Francis was sent to Eton. He was destined for the army, always wanted to be a soldier. Odd how he's got his way in the end." Phipps became suddenly thoughtful. "Though I rather doubt, between you and me, if he'll ever see active service again."

"Do you think he's really as bad as that?" Isoël asked anxiously.

"P'r'aps not. Time will tell. Well, to get back to

my story. Lady Caroline, once more in the old familiar life, seemed to make up for lost time. Gaieties from morning till night! She entertained half London. Royalty took her up and poor old Doran didn't count. He simply loathed the life they led, with no peace or leisure for work — and he was a fine painter, mind you, beginning to make a name for himself.

"It became a toss-up between his art and guarding his wife's reputation. He played the game gallantly; and then, at last, something happened. Nobody knows exactly what. Some people say that the Royal favour had become a trifle too pronounced. Anyhow,"— he shrugged his shoulders —"the pair parted, by 'mutual consent'— not a legal separation — with the usual fight over the children. David Doran had no income beyond what he made by portrait-painting and Lady Caroline wanted the boy. But he stuck to his father through thick and thin, though it broke up his own career. And pretty thin it was at times! I've known Francis make his lunch off an apple and a crust. A day-scholar at St. Paul's! A bit of a change after Eton — eh? His father wasn't the popular painter who follows a fashion, and, after the rupture, without the support of his wife's friends, he slipped into a quiet circle of a few real connoisseurs and artists sincere like himself. He wouldn't pander to the crowd. That's not the way to make money."

"But Mr. Doran's rich now?" She put the question casually though her heart was beating rather fast.

"Rolling!" Phipps laughed. "That's the funny part of it. His mother left him everything! Well, she was queer — like all the Garths. I suppose she admired the boy's pluck. Her husband wasn't mentioned at all. She never forgave him for refusing to fall in with her escapades. Wasn't it a turn of the wheel? A beautiful home in Dorsetshire and a solid fifteen thousand a year."

Isoël's cheeks flushed pink.

"He deserved it," she said warmly. For, apart from her interest in his wealth, the picture of that youthful champion, loyal to his impoverished father appealed to her imagination. "I suppose they launched out then?"

"Hardly at all. A pair of cranks." Phipps returned her incredulous smile. "They went on living as before in a tiny house off the Fulham Road, with occasional jaunts on the Continent, let the place to Americans. Francis, when he left Oxford — I forgot to tell you he'd worked like a nigger at St. Paul's and won a scholarship — was eventually called to the bar. It was too late to think of the army. He was just beginning to make a start when his father died and the war broke out. Off he went at once to enlist.

"They offered him a commission later and then he got his V.C. for a fine piece of heroism."

"But what did he do?" she insisted.

"Oh, I forgot you hadn't heard. They were cut off from their supports and he went back through a barrage fire with a message. And *returned* — by Jove! That's the astounding part of it. Fancy facing that hell twice! The reserves came up just in time and if it hadn't been for Doran they'd all of them been wiped out. But he stopped a bullet on the way though he struggled on in spite of this and several other minor wounds. Haven't you seen his scarred hands? He put them up before his face. Oh, he's a jolly fine chap!" His enthusiasm swept him away. "He deserves the very best in life."

The girl nodded, her brain in a whirl.

"I'd no idea. He never seemed to want to talk about the war."

Phipps grunted.

"He's not the sort to like his photo in the papers standing before Buckingham Palace with the Victoria Cross in his hand, showing it to a babe in a pram, with an eye on the pretty nurse!"

The little tirade relieved his feelings. He relapsed into his frivolous mood.

"Perhaps he'll show it to *you* one day, if you're very nice. I shouldn't wonder! How did you enjoy Murano?" His blue eyes were mischevious. He had met the pair returning home.

"Very much," she said sedately. "It's wonderful to see a man — just a common workman — twist about that molten glass with a pair of pincers, blow on it and evolve with apparent carelessness those fragile-looking

flowers and dolphins! I could stand watching it for hours. I suppose it's an inherited art?"

"I believe it's passed from father to son." Phipps was not interested. Humanity in his own class appealed to him more, with its weaknesses. He wondered if Isoël liked Doran?

She leaned back in her chair watching the people in the Piazza.

"Look at that girl with the red hair. I suppose that's the real Venetian type though I haven't seen many yet. Is it true they used to get the colour through sitting bareheaded in the sunshine by the canals and wetting their locks from time to time? I suppose it's the action of the salt."

"Don't ask me. I hate red hair."

"Oh!" She turned, mischievous. "And what about Miss Percival?"

Phipps tried to look self-conscious.

"I don't gather what you mean?"

"*Don't you!*" She rose from her chair. "Well, here she comes with her mamma. I'll leave you to their tender mercies. So many thanks for my dissipation." She waved her hand towards the *vermouth*. "It's rather like Mrs. Percival: sweet, with a bitter aftermath. I'm sure it must be a splendid tonic!"

"*Don't* desert me," Phipps entreated; but she slipped away, finger to lip. He nodded his head, understanding, as the pair of busybodies approached. "So fair and yet so cruel!" Phipps resigned himself to fate. He straightened his tie surreptitiously and ordered another glass of *vermouth*.

Meanwhile Isoël walked quickly through the arcades and past the Loggetta until she came to the water.

Should she take a gondola? It seemed rather extravagant, but she wanted a quiet time to think.

As she paused, debating the question, she saw a woman passing her in a coat and skirt of "putty" cloth and recognized a Clotilde model. Something familiar in the face with its pointed chin and hazel eyes riveted her attention. Why, it was Mrs. Serocold!

The client's name was familiar to her. She recalled a strong altercation, between "Monsieur" and his wife, on

the subject of an overdue account that ran into three figures.

"Monsieur" had counselled patience. He had made inquiries about the husband; a wealthy man untouched by the war, at least to any serious extent. Let the customer order some more costly gowns for the spring before they moved in the matter. Their books had shown a falling-off of habituées in these evil days and they risked losing a rich client by resorting to legal measures.

The memory made Isoël smile. How far away those days seemed! Then another thought struck her.

She remembered that she had talked to the lady herself, standing posed in the very model from which this well-cut gown was copied. Would Mrs. Serocold recognize her?

Moved by a sudden impulse, she turned and followed in her wake.

Mrs. Serocold walked briskly, with short steps, in her high-heeled shoes. She was rather stiff in her carriage, which suggested that she was at the mercy of a stern *corsetière*. She shaded her face, which owed its charm to an impertinent little nose and a carefully preserved complexion, with a dark blue *en-tout-cas* and from her wrist swung a gold chain purse, cigarette-holder and powder-box.

Isoël noted all these details as she moved a few paces behind. She decided that the pleated skirt was a little too short for her full figure, that her shoulders were getting a shade too plump and that her hair looked artificial.

They passed the portico of St. Mark's and here Mrs. Serocold turned to the right and made for the open door of "Cook's." She went in, and Isoël paused outside to gaze into the window at the gay pamphlets and pictures of ships and decide upon her course of action.

It might be useful in the future to avoid this phantom from the past, though she did not suspect in the least that Clotilde's client knew Doran. From where she herself had stood in the show-room she could not see more than the vague outline of a man in khaki on the balcony.

Still it was well to be prudent. She decided to put

it to the test and if she were recognized to beat a retreat hastily.

Through the glass she could see Mrs. Serocold cashing a draft at the counter and tucking the notes in her gold bag with a loving care and exactitude.

"Fond of money," she said to herself as the lady, her mission accomplished, strolled across to a side table and opened the massive Visitors' Book.

She ran her finger down the entries until she came to a certain name and stood for a moment thoughtfully, her hazel eyes turned to the light, a shrewd smile on her lips. She looked now ten years older, for the glare showed up the tiny lines and the loose skin in the base of her throat.

"Would pass for thirty in candlelight," was Isoël's merciless summing-up.

Then she gathered her courage together and advanced as the lady prepared to depart. They met in the narrow doorway with the furtive appraisement of two women who know their value in men's eyes.

Mrs. Serocold's cool stare raked the pretty face before her and passed on indifferently to a party of tourists in the Piazza.

"Good!" Isoël felt relieved. As an excuse for her visit she demanded the trains to Padua.

An attentive young clerk wrote them down neatly for her on a slip of paper, remarked that the day was delightfully warm, rubbed his hands as though they were chilly and suggested that Venice was "filling up," despite the war, but with "few Germans." They "would not be missed," he insinuated and cackled over his little joke. She freed herself from his attentions and following Mrs. Serocold's lead took a peep at the Visitors' Book.

"I'm getting a regular Sherlock Holmes!" she decided gaily. "But I'd like to know who her friends are. One never can tell! It's a small world. It was on the last page, half-way down."

She deciphered the straggling list of names, amused at a German signature, very ornate and followed by the casual after-thought "and wife," then stopped dead, her eyes narrowed.

In a firm but small hand was inscribed: "Francis M. Doran, London." Beyond it was "Hotel Danieli."

It gave her a little shock. She closed the book and passed out into the sunshine. Instinctively she turned into the great church, seeking the cool space and silence.

Absently she genuflected before the far distant altar and, moving into a side chapel, deserted by the sight-seers, sat down on a chair beside an erection where wax candles were ranged to attract the pious.

"I must think." Her arched brows were knit, her chin cupped in her hand. "Of course I *may* have been mistaken, but she seemed to pause at that very spot. Now, supposing he is a friend of hers and I meet them together, what shall I do? If I spoke she might recall my voice and that would upset all my plans. She looks a dangerous enemy, and if ever a woman is a cat it's when her looks are on the wane. It would be no use bluffing. She has only to write a line to Clotilde. Why didn't I change my name?"

Here was an unforseen disaster. The fairy prince of her dreams, so utterly desirable, whirled away upon a broomstick by a witch with a pointed chin!

For, since her long talk with Phipps, Doran had gained immeasurably in importance in the girl's eyes; not only through the fact of his wealth, his birth and his martial honours, but because of that force of character, surmised before and now proven by the stern romance of his boyhood.

Here was no easy victim swayed by the impulse of his passions. Her pride revolted at the thought that Doran might consider her in the light of a passing amusement. She realized that the man admired her, sought her out determinedly; but then, as he himself admitted laughingly, it was "part of his cure." He was bored to death alone in Venice. He offered himself a diversion. And if he once knew her for what she was — she pressed her hands to her hot cheeks — he would consider her "fair game." She had no delusions on that score!

So far she had steadily held her own. But, during their trip to Murano, they had slipped into an under-

standing, outwardly friendly but full of the deep and subtle excitement of a flirtation.

She would never have such a chance again: the same sunny environment with the helpful presence of Mrs. Brace and the slight spur of rivalry introduced by Stacy Phipps. For Doran was inclined to be jealous, though he would not have admitted the fact.

She wondered how long she could afford to stay in Venice? Hurriedly she ran through her finances and the cloud lifted from her face. What a power money was! And she owed it all to Sir Abel Groot.

She had heard from him that very morning, a short and business-like epistle. For Sir Abel was a cautious man. He had won his success in life through this and an instinct regarding money that almost amounted to clairvoyance.

She had told him the gossip of the *pension* amusingly, and the friends she had made, but for some odd reason she had refrained from all mention of Doran's name.

"I'm glad now." She bit her lip. "If things go wrong he can't chaff me." A sudden wave of temper shook her. "But they *shan't!* He's mine. I'll *make* him care!"

A woman with a dark shawl drawn over her head and shoulders stole up through the gloom and kneeling on the worn pavement began to drone over her beads.

Click, click, the rosary rattled in the heavy silence, its owner lost to the world around her.

Isoël watched her, fascinated. For the first time she became aware of the charm of this little chapel, sacred to St. Isidore. Dim and softened by the gloom, mosaics glimmered on the walls; the altar boasted a pair of lions on either side and embossed on the front, she could just discern some frenzied horses dragging the Saint to his martyrdom. From far away came a note of chanting, a thin dirge-like ribbon of sound that varied from tone to semi-tone, measured and melancholy.

The bending figure finished her prayers and rose to her feet, gathering up a market basket covered by a faded square of blue linen. As she passed Isoël's chair, the latter caught a glimpse of her face, pale and

mournful, with wide dark eyes, mystical as a painted Madonna's.

The sacred atmosphere began to react upon the girl herself. Alone once more, she slipped down on to her knees, her hands folded. But her prayers would not form themselves into words, lost in the endless conflict between wordly desire and religion.

She relinquished the effort and gave herself up to a vague vision, feeling the peace of the sanctuary weigh down on her like wings that closed above her head. And slowly inspiration came. She would take a vow upon herself. If the Virgin would grant her request she swore to be a good wife, to relinquish all further dreams of ambition, a true daughter of the Church.

She was quite sincere in this pitiful bargain of frail humanity with the powers eternal and unwavering. She saw nothing inadequate in the gift and its reward. And, having added a pattered *ave,* she rose, joyous to her feet and paid a toll in advance, slipping a *lira* into the Poor-box.

Dusting her skirt she gave the curls on either cheek a little pat and with a mystical light in her eyes, high hope in her heart, she passed out of that great gold vault, sheltering the bones of Mark.

CHAPTER XIII

RAIN had descended upon Venice.

The evening sky was blotted out and an opal mist curled up from the sea to join the steady downward drizzle. From the narrow *calle* rose a smell of mouldy walls, and everywhere roofs dripped and the grey canals filled and gathered in the refuse, barely noticed in the sunshine, which littered steps and dark archways. Gone were the brightly coloured garments that hung from the upper windows, often in rags but adding to the festal appearance like gay banners. Women with their winter shawls drawn tightly over their heads and wound round their graceful bodies picked their way over the pavements, where little streams between the stones ran feverishly to the nearest canal, and everywhere was the "glop, glop" of small impromptu waterfalls.

A few gondolas persisted, funereal with their raised *felze,* no longer leisurely pleasure-craft but serving the purposes of cabs.

From one of these, at eight o'clock with a little shiver of disgust, a dainty lady stepped forth on to the deserted *riva* in front of the Hotel Danieli. The hall porter hastened forward, a vast green umbrella in hand, and escorted her across the pavement.

Discarding her damp cloak in the entrance she moved instinctively to a mirror, with an anxious glance at her waved hair under its becoming toque.

Doran waited, smiling a little until the lady turned again, evidently satisfied, then he advanced to greet his guest.

"This is awfully good of you, Tory. I was afraid that the rain might stop you. No need to ask how you are! You're looking radiant, as ever."

"I don't believe it. I'm so cold. *Feel!*" She placed both her hands, sparkling with rings, in his. "It's worse than England and my hotel hasn't a single Christian fire-place!"

"You poor child!" He smiled at her, but released

her fingers carelessly. "The dining-room is nice and warm, shall we go in? Or aren't you hungry?"

"Famished! The food's so poor at my place. I've a great mind to move here." She gave him a coquettish glance as they crossed the hall and added quickly, "Though I suppose it wouldn't do."

"Why not?" He evaded the point.

She made no immediate response but when they were seated at the table, her gold purse by her side with a pair of long *suède* gloves, she returned to the attack.

"You and I — here alone? It's tempting, but far too risky. Though it's just like old times to-night." She sighed, then pouted her reddened lips as Doran refused to follow her lead.

Instead, he looked mischievous.

"It needs Felix to complete it."

"Oh, don't remind me of him! I've come to Venice to forget. You've no idea what it's like now. This war has given him his chance. He's gone mad on economy; it always was a hobby of his. I believe he's grateful to the Huns!"

"As bad as that?" Doran frowned.

"Yes. He's actually sold the 'Mastiff' and we've only got the 'Pup' between us." She referred to the big Rolls-Royce and their other car, a landaulette. "Of course he takes it to the city every morning and there I am, reduced to taxis, which I hate!"

"Or omnibuses," the soldier suggested.

"Oh, I *couldn't!*" She gave a shiver. "It isn't fair that we should be asked to make so many sacrifices when you think how we're paying for the war with this terrific income-tax. The Government ought to see to it. What are they doing?" She spread out her hands. "And look at all the charities! Felix is not hit at all. I know that for a fact. It's sheer meanness, nothing else. He actually suggested to me that I should part with Thérèse! I assure you, it made me quite ill. I went to bed and sent for the doctor, and he ordered me a thorough change, recommended the Riviera." She broke off. "What nice soup!"

"Glad you think so. The food's not bad. Better than we get in the trenches!" His voice was a shade

ironical. No man who has once been involved in the deadly vortex of this war can bear to hear it treated lightly by those who grudge the price of munitions. Still it was only a passing cloud. He went on more genially, "Poor old Tory! It's hard lines. Though every one's in the same boat."

"Every one's not married to Felix!" She laughed back, a little shrilly, and Doran politely joined in.

"So, after all, you came to Venice?"

"Yes. I had a letter from Cossie who's trying a system at Monte Carlo and he said that the whole place was changed, crowded out with wounded soldiers. None of the old gaiety! So then I decided on Italy, where, thank heaven, there's no war! I really needed cheering up, and although I know Rome and Naples, I've never been here before. I can't say I care for the climate, if this is a fair specimen."

"But think of yesterday," he pleaded. "Wasn't it a glorious morning? I *was* surprised when I ran across you, strolling calmly in the Piazza. Awfully pleased! It was quite a joy to see a really well-dressed woman. People here are distinctly dowdy."

She drank in the compliment and instinctively stroked down the soft folds of her black gown, veiled over her full bosom; but none the more discreet for that!

"D'you like this frock? It's one of Clotilde's."

His face altered at the name. She made a false calculation, unaware how latterly it had loomed largely in his mind.

"Surely you've forgiven me?" She adopted a babyish voice, with a pathetic little gesture. "Naughty Fwancis! Just becos Tory wanted a p'itty fwock!"

Oddly enough this absurd assumption of childishness suited her. The smooth face with its pointed chin and her plump figure suggested youth in the shaded lights; while her worldly eyes with a smiling note of provocation added a touch of piquancy.

Doran responded to her mood, amused by his own thoughts.

"Little Tory would have been smacked and put to bed if I'd had my way! She didn't think of *my* discomfort amidst that — indecent display!"

"My dear boy, it was only dresses! And hats. What could be more correct?"

"And pretty milliners," he suggested, "who gave me the glad eye."

"Did they?" her own twinkled. "Now I know why I'm forgiven."

Doran was thinking hard. He wondered if he could pump Tory without raising her suspicions. He decided to risk it, with due caution.

"One of the girls was uncommonly smart. That dark one who came in first."

"Rosalie?" She raised her brows. "But the other had the best figure."

"Yes, perhaps." He nodded his head. "I was wondering in what class they were. A shade above the shop-girl, what?"

"In manners perhaps, if not in morals!" Her voice was supercilious. Clotilde has them trained, I hear, how to walk and enter a room and to speak with a Parisian accent! I suppose it pays her in the end."

"You encourage me," said Doran, smiling. "Do you think I'd stand an earthly chance? With 'dark Rosaleen,' for instance."

She gave a little shrug of her shoulders.

"Of course they're all run by men! That's a part of the arrangement. The salaries are absurdly small and Clotilde winks the other eye."

Doran felt exasperated. It was not so much the callous speech but the worldly knowledge that underlay it and the calm assumption of the speaker that a *mannequin* had no morals.

Was Isoël like that? If so, where was the man? It seemed hardly likely to Doran that she was financed by an admirer to enjoy herself "on her own" in Venice. Surely he would have come with her?

On the other hand, if the salaries paid by Clotilde were so absurdly small, how could she afford the trip?

Savings? He shrank from the thought.

Could she be doing business in Venice? But then Mrs. Brace would have guessed it. He had no doubt on the latter's caste. She would never take a *mannequin* under her exclusive wing! Or was the girl in truth a

lady, reduced to earning her own living in this rather unpleasant way? Women took up odd trades now, tea-shops and tobacconist's.

His heart warred with his reason. For she lacked something he could not define, the unmistakable touch of breeding. Where she should have been self-assured she narrowly missed impertinence, and fluctuated between a coldness, which was hardly warranted, and a flippant friendliness that held a symptom of nervousness.

He had not been a barrister for nothing and the habit of keen observation persisted.

All this passed swiftly through his mind before he reverted to the topic.

"I suppose this war will make a difference; there's a big demand for feminine labour." He spoke with a certain gravity which surprised his frivolous companion. "It always seems unfair to me that girls should get such poor wages and have to eke it out that way."

"Have to?" Her chin went up. She gave a cynical little laugh. "I suppose they know what they're about and prefer it to shabby clothes."

"I'm glad you don't blame the men." Quiet satire was in his voice.

"Why should I?" She laughed again. "You're such a funny boy, Francis. You always were, in the old days."

The waiter intervened with the wine.

Mrs. Serocold tasted it and glanced up.

"It's so nice! What is it?"

"*Lacrimae Christi*, the Tears of Christ," he translated literally. An odd thought followed the words: the sorrow of the Perfect Man who cast no stones at a fallen woman. Surely a chivalry that should move to compassion her purer sisters? Doran, like most men, despised a tendency in the sex to minimize the charm and virtue of other women when admired.

"What a funny name for a wine!" Mrs. Serocold seemed amused. "Perhaps the monks invented it; they knew what was good, didn't they? I like to try new things. That's partly why I came to Venice. I hope you're going to show me round. All the sights, both orthodox and those one doesn't talk about!"

"That's rather a large order." He laughed. "I'm supposed to be a competent guide to the former variety — having lived here for ten years — but my fault is I'm carried away by too much beauty. So now you're warned!"

She took the inference to herself.

"We'll risk it together," she answered gaily. "You've never said if you liked this frock? A new one, put on for you."

"Flattered! I think it's charming. All I can see of it." His glance, rather insolent, ran over the veiled *décolletage* and paused at a diamond arrow that held a knot of white bell-like flowers — where indeed, they were needed!

He raised his eyes again to her face.

"It's a triumph of skill over Nature! 'Behold the lilies of the field'—"

"*Francis!*" She corrected him. "I don't think you've improved. What have you been up to in Venice? It seems years since we met!"

"That's the reason," he said promptly, "I need your restraining hand."

It lay at this moment on the table, playing with her gilded trifles. She opened it invitingly and smiled deep into his eyes.

"It's always there — when you want it."

Doran looked down at her fingers.

"But you don't wear my ring now? It would hardly vie with the others."

"It isn't that," she said quickly. "But Felix — Oh, well, you know! My life's hard enough as it is, and he's always been so stupidly jealous. Rather a dog in the manger, too! Doesn't care for his own biscuit, but nobody else must dare to nibble."

"Mustn't they?" The wine and light and this playing with words were stimulating, together with the memories, skilfully evoked by her, of their boy and girl love affair.

Many a time since the day when Tory had broken off the engagement, frightened at his poverty, in favour of a wealthy man had Doran thanked the kindly fates for preserving him from an early marriage. Yet, every

now and then, a spark from the old flame rose and quickened, and desire was bred from the ashes of love.

He did not want her as a wife, yet he felt that proprietary instinct which a man who has raised a first passion is conscious of physically.

Now she played with his suggestion.

"It's strictly against the law."

"Who cares for the law? At least in Venice."

"And you, a barrister!" she laughed.

"Then you might trust me to evade it."

He watched her refuse an ice and as the waiter went off he leaned forward and spoke softly.

"Let's have our coffee up in my room. It's far snugger." She looked a shade taken aback and he exclaimed with a smile, "I've a sitting-room on the first floor and we should be able to talk in peace."

"*Can* we? Is it safe?" Her eyes were bright, but she hesitated. "You don't know any one in the hotel?"

"No, thank heaven." He stood up. "If we go now the hall will be empty. Come along, before it's too late."

She nodded her head and led the way with the pleasant consciousness that people turned to stare at her and Doran. They made rather a striking pair.

Once outside they glanced round guiltily and sped upstairs, avoiding the lift. There was no one about.

"This way." He held out his hand. She took it gaily. He drew her through the door of his room, closed it quickly and, stooping, kissed her in the dark.

"*Francis!*"

He let her go.

"I couldn't help it. It's such a lark!" He turned on the lights and added, laughing, "Shall I have to come up before Felix?"

His tactlessness jarred on her.

"I wish you wouldn't bring him in." She spoke rather pettishly.

"It was not I who brought him in, in the first instance," said Doran drily.

"No." She sank down on the sofa, moved a little by his words. "What a fool I was — a little *fool!*" She smote the hard sofa cushion, her gloves clenched in her

hand. "When I think of it — to give you up — for *that!* To lead the life I do. It's like — who was the creature I mean, who starved with food all round him? Money, money everywhere! And yet, here am I, ruined! Always in debt — bills — bills! And now —" Her head sank down in her hands.

"Why, *Tory!*" He looked aghast. He bent down over the sofa and patted her shoulder in the way that women invariably resent; a man's caress to a child, holding a hint of patronage. Why couldn't he take her in his arms?

She flinched, raising strained eyes.

"Oh, you don't understand! How should you? I'm done for, this time. I'm in the most hopeless mess. That's why I ran away from home — I couldn't face it! When Felix knows —" She drew a long sobbing breath.

Doran's face was grave now.

"Tell me. That is, if you can; without betraying confidence."

"Oh, it's not that! I wish it were." The artless response made him smile. "I can always manage *men*," she said, "except Felix. It's something worse."

They started apart as the waiter tapped at the door and came in with the coffee. Mrs. Serocold looked angry.

She had played her cards skilfully. But servants always interrupted at the moment when they were least wanted and were never there when you required them!

Doran added to her impatience by telling the man to draw the curtains.

"And make up the fire whilst you're about it. That's better." He turned to his guest as the waiter obeyed him and retired. He was rather glad of the short respite. He had a man's horror of "scenes."

"Now then, a cup of coffee? It will do you good and then we'll talk." "Beast!" thought Mrs. Serocold. "Don't you move. I'm bringing it."

"Thanks." She forced a pathetic smile. "You're a comforting soul, aren't you, Francis?"

"Am I? Glad to hear it." He had got himself in

hand again. "If it's only money—" His voice was cheerful.

Her spirits revived at this remark.

"Ah, it's all very well for you. You *lucky* boy!" She patted the sofa by her side. "Come here and sit down. You make me restless, wandering about."

Doran, armed with his coffee cup, obeyed. A silence fell between them.

"There!" She had drained the last drop.

He rose and put the cup back, then returned to his old position.

"Well, little woman?" He smiled at her as a brother might. "Let's hear it."

"I'm afraid to tell you." She played with her gloves.

"Poor old Tory! Out with it."

"You won't scold me?" Her lips quivered.

"I couldn't, when you look like that."

"Ah." She moved a trifle closer. "You remember the day I went to Clotilde's?"

"Yes." He stared at her, surprised. Did everything in the world hinge round that mysterious establishment?

"Well, I went out of desper*ation!* I owed her such a frightful lot, I thought of ordering something new to put her into a good temper."

"I see—the homœopathic method. *Similia similibus curantur.* Unluckily there comes an end to that form of logic in high finance."

"Yes—but you needn't smile! I only wanted a few weeks. I knew that Felix would make me a present on my birthday. He's rather archaic over dates and anniversaries! So just before that solemn event I confessed that I had overdrawn and that Clotilde was pestering me. I only showed him the earlier bills and after a lecture that lasted for hours, with the war dragged in, and 'economy,' he gave me a cheque for three hundred pounds."

"'Most noble Felix'! Weren't you pleased?"

"Y—es." Her voice was rather doubtful. "Only he made one stipulation: that two-thirds of it should go to Clotilde."

"Well, but wasn't that what you wanted?" Doran looked at her curiously.

"It seemed rather hard, with a *present*. But I promised him—" She broke off and laid a hand upon his arm. "If you're going to be unkind to me—" Tears welled up into her eyes.

Doran hastily recanted.

"Sorry. I didn't mean that. Poor old girl! Go on."

"*Sure?*"

He took her fingers in his.

"I swear it. By the littlest one!" He pinched it lightly as he spoke. "The one that 'went to market,' you know, and found it had nothing in its purse! What did it do?"

"All sorts of folly! If *only* it had 'stayed at home.'" She sighed and resumed the story. "I was going away, in a few days, to stay in Norfolk with Bertie Strode."

"It doesn't sound strictly proper."

Tory smiled.

"Oh, don't you know her? She's a cousin of the Romillys. She'd asked me down for a 'quiet week.' I wasn't quite *sure* about it. People are so funny now. Tell you not to bring a maid and send for you in the station cab! Besides the knitting from morning to night and everybody whipped in. But I found it quite comfy there, although they drew the line at champagne." She wandered off on a side track. "Between you and me, my dear, these country visits *need* champagne. With cold halls, and draughts in your neck, and evening dresses, and wind in the chimneys." She shivered. "I can't *bear* to hear it! And besides it's always rather an effort to talk to country people, I find. They've no *real* interests in life beyond what I call 'parochial matters.' The latest 'meet' and the state of the crops and whether Hodge will stand for Sludgeby!"

Her wit carried her away and Doran joined in her gay laugh.

"Not your style. I quite see that. But what happened?" He was amused. This butterfly trailing a crumpled wing was as good as a play, he decided.

"There was nothing to do from morning to night! Hardly a man in the place—"

Doran threw back his head and roared.

"That would limit your chances of mischief."

"It didn't." She smiled sadly. "We played Bridge for high stakes. They always do down at Beechcroft. Have you noticed that it's the one thing that is still sacred, the stakes of the house? War economy can't touch it. It's our last lingering tradition. Well, of course I couldn't be out of it, though I'm not fond of playing with women. That is, without men. They're so frightfully grasping over money! But at first I won—" She paused and raised eyes grown tragic to his face. "And then I lost—*everything!*"

"Including the three hundred pounds. I suppose you hadn't paid Clotilde?"

"No." She bit her underlip and drew her hand away from his.

He did not seem to notice this. He was sorry for her with a trace of contempt that embraced her sex. By a twist of logic he absolved her from the sterner code he exacted from his fellow men. What was a promise to a woman? Pretty things with a sense of honour less defined and fluctuating. He pitied her. The feeling grew into one of amused tenderness. Some one ought to look after her? What was that husband of hers about?

"And now you daren't confess to Felix. Is that it?" His tone was gentle.

"I couldn't! But it's worse than that. Clotilde threatens me with a writ."

"When?" Doran spoke sharply.

"In less than a week!" She threw out her hands. "What shall I do? You can't understand what it will mean for me—with Felix!"

"Yes, I can," he said tersely.

"I thought perhaps if I were ill, here in Venice, he might relent. There are things one can take—" Her eyes widened.

"Good Lord!" He caught at her wrist. "Tory! You little fool!"

She collapsed weakly, hysterical under his touch, swaying forward against his shoulder.

"What does it matter? I've nothing to lose — to live for —" A sob broke from her. "I shouldn't really care *if* —"

He checked her sternly, moved himself.

"And you never thought of coming to *me*, your oldest friend?"

She stretched out her hands.

"*You* —" she sobbed. "Of all people! The only man I've ever loved! To lose — your respect —"

With an odd sound, midway between a laugh and a groan, Doran gathered her up in his arms.

PART II

THE VISION SPLENDID

CHAPTER XIV

"ISOËL! Isoël!"

A voice came up out of the night to the girl where she stood on her balcony, gazing down at the canal.

The moon, white in the heavens, pierced through the indigo shadows of the narrow *rio* and turned the line of water into a shining blade, on which the bridges were impaled, in its outward thrust to the lagoon.

The uneven line of roofs beyond was carved nett against the sky, deeply blue and alive with stars, that seemed to hang suspended in space, like the myriad lamps of a temple.

The clarity of every object, save where the shadows lay like pools of blue-black ink, was almost uncanny. It produced a sense of unreality, like the view through a powerful field-glass of a distant scene brought startlingly close.

Isoël, absorbed in it, jumped as the summons reached her ears.

A gondola had stolen up silently from the Grand Canal and now was lying motionless underneath her open window, the boatman leaning on his oar, and, beyond him, a tall man in an overcoat stood erect with the moonlight on his face.

"Is that you, Mr. Doran?" There was no need to ask the question. She could see each feature, the dark brows, aquiline nose and firm chin and the small moustache, clipped close, that fringed the mobile legal mouth. For, although his bearing was that of the soldier, his earlier profession was marked by his lips, with their shrewd humorous curves, trained to careful enunciation.

"Who else?" He smiled back. "Come out, fair lady! 'Tis a night when

'All that we see or seem
Is but a dream within a dream.'

"You look like Juliet up there. If you don't come down I shall climb up."

She gave an uncertain little laugh.

"Where are you going?"

"To the lagoon. Come with me? Slip on a coat and steal down warily. It's such a night for adventure."

"It's late."

"Never too late for Venice. The water is alive with boats. Can't you hear the singing barges?"

She listened, tempted against her reason.

From far away a man's deep voice came throbbing:

"Addio, anima mia . . ."

It sank away and, through the silence, like a ripple of laughter, was followed closely by a chorus from another barge:

"Ciribiribin, Ciribiribin . . ,"

"I'll come!" A spirit of recklessness took hold of her. "Don't stay there." She lowered her voice. "Take your boat to the second bridge and wait for me."

"You're not playing me a trick?" His teeth flashed in the moonlight.

"No." She disappeared from sight.

As she wound a motor veil round her head and secured the ends of the gauze, her reason rose and pointed out the folly of this escapade.

"Now," it warned her, "you're giving your foes something real to talk about."

"I don't care!" she flung back. "I'm utterly sick of being good. I'd sooner have a little fun and pay for it than go on like this!"

Here was the mood that Patty feared.

She slipped her arms into her coat, buttoned the strap round her slim waist with an air of wilful determination and, disdaining gloves, sallied forth.

As she tiptoed past the drawing-room door she could hear Mrs. Percival's loud voice, rather tense, declare "Four Hearts," and Phipps's eager, "Double you!"

She hated the young man at that moment and, by some feminine rule of logic, Doran appeared more desirable; Doran, who was "true to her"!

She joined him at the chosen spot.

"You *have* been quick!" He glanced at her approvingly; at the neat coat and her burnished hair, with the deep blue veil, like an evening mist falling softly across it. Her bare fingers felt cool and soft as he helped her into the gondola, that boat which seems designed for love. A subtle triumph stirred in his heart.

"Now," he smiled. "Whither away?"

"I don't care." She shrugged her shoulders. "I want to feel the breeze in my face blowing off the little cobwebs."

"Good!" He gave a swift order. Giovanni smiled and bent to his oar. "Isn't this perfect? Look at the stars." Doran stretched himself out at ease, his head luxuriously propped on a cushion. "The Big Bear and the Little Bear and the whole merry menagerie!"

She did not respond to this at once and his gaze shifted to her face. She was looking very pale to-night. There were violet shadows under her eyes which seemed to intensify their depths. Her shoulders drooped; her mouth was tragic. She seemed more Eastern than ever, he thought.

"What is it, child?" Instinctively his hand reached out and closed on hers. The firm clasp was comforting to the tired girl in her loneliness.

"I wonder if you'd understand?" She drew a little fluttering sigh. "If you laughed at me?"—she tried to smile—"I think it would be the last straw!"

Doran's face grew rather grave.

"Try me." He whispered the words. "I can see there's something wrong to-night. Surely you know me well enough? I hate to see you looking sad."

She gave him a veiled grateful glance, then her heavy lids fell. Was it wise to confide in him?

Yet how it would ease her troubled heart!

"Every one's so hateful to me."

"At the *pension*?" His eyes narrowed. So that was it. The local gossips had unearthed a secret about the girl. He felt a little thrill of excitement. Was she going to tell him, at last?

"Yes." She nodded her head slowly. "Even Mr. Phipps has changed."

"Phipps was always a weathercock." He dismissed him with a virile man's disdain for a weaker brother. "I don't suppose you mind that much?"

"No. But there's nobody else to speak to!" She gave a little half-hearted laugh. "Mrs. Percival rules the place. You've met her, haven't you?"

"Once. She trotted out her daughters and then began to discuss their shortcomings. They seemed to be great friends with Phipps, a sort of triangular flirtation. He's a strong man, Phipps." His mouth twisted. "Prefers taking 'em on in a bunch!"

"He's a wise one," Isoël mocked. "He always sides with those in power. Ever since Mrs. Brace left—" She paused, aware of Doran's surprise. "Oh, didn't you know? They went last week; were recalled hurriedly to England. The son-in-law has had a stroke. He's been half-paralysed for years. Poor dears, they were so upset! I miss them dreadfully. She hated Mrs. Percival and had no scruple in showing it. It became a sort of battle between them as to who should be leader in the place. So now, of course, I'm being punished for siding with the rival party."

She thought she had managed it cleverly; for it was only a part of the truth.

Doran gave her a keen glance. He saw farther than she guessed. An odd feeling of disappointment succeeded his impulse of sympathy. Why couldn't the girl be honest? He would have respected her far more.

"That's rather rough on you," he said. "But aren't there any of her friends left in the *pension*?"

She hesitated.

"Very few. A new lot came on Friday, but they seem to keep to themselves. Then there are all the old maids. I don't think they approve of me!"

"Sour grapes." Doran chuckled. "Still, it must be rather dull. You'll have to fall back upon the guide."

"Apparently!" Her spirits were rising.

"He's always at your service, you know." He pressed the hand under his. She drew it away with the excuse of securing her fluttering veil. For the air grew keen as they came to the wide stretch of lagoon, beyond San Giorgio.

She turned sideways and gazed back.

"Look at Venice. Isn't it fine?"

Doran followed her lingering glance. Like a city carved in mother of pearl and set with jewels that caught the light, with its fantastic spires and domes, it rose, fragile, from the waters. In the clear moonlight it seemed to float, drawn by the stars and the night's desire, a vision intangible as a dream, light as a puff of thistledown.

"A mirage on the desert's edge," he mused. "Too beautiful to be real."

"It's like life," said the girl. "As one *fancies* it. Not as it is."

The wistful words appealed to him. He nodded his head rather gravely.

"Though I think we can shape life ourselves. If we're strong enough," he added grimly.

"How?" She questioned him like a child.

"Oh, I don't know. By facing facts. Most of our troubles we make for ourselves by playing a game of pretence. That's the fault of society. All show and nothing real. And then they wonder that pleasure's hollow! They're fed up, that's the truth." He smiled down at her serious face. "You see, I've seen both sides of it. I'm well off now, as money goes, but I've known what it is to be bitterly poor and to feel at times ashamed of it. No, not quite that." He was hunting for words to convey a more accurate impression. "A boy suffers more than a man among his fellows. A leggy young colt, grown out of his shabby clothes, and self-conscious — that's the rub!" He gave her an amused glance.

But Isoël's face warmed.

"I think it was splendid! I heard the story."

"Phipps?" Doran looked annoyed. She regretted her unwise admission. "Well, it doesn't matter." He laughed lightly, masking his sudden impatience. But what a gossip the fellow was! "I don't suppose he troubled to tell you the best part — about my father." His voice softened suddenly. "He was simply a splendid chap. Not a bit the orthodox parent. A pal in every sense of the word. We lived like boys playing truant — the happiest days of my life. You know, I

still keep on the house; I couldn't bear to part with it. I live there when I'm in town. I should like to show it you some day."

A thrill of triumph shot through her. So he didn't mean this to be a passing acquaintance, to end in Venice. She answered softly:

"I hope you will."

Doran ran on cheerfully:

"Not much of a place to look at, except for my father's pictures. I've kept his studio just as it was. It's a mere cottage, with one big room built out over the garden and a little workshop added on with a carpenter's bench, *my* sanctum! I had a craze for inventing things. There's nothing after all that beats the joy of saying: 'I made it myself'!" A sudden thought struck him here and he followed it up carefully. "Do women feel the same?"

"Of course. Though we haven't an equal chance."

"You have now," he reminded her. "This war has altered all that. And in detail women should go ahead. They've learnt the mastery of their fingers. Now, I, for instance could make a chair but I couldn't turn out a lady's dress."

"I shouldn't care to wear it," she laughed.

"Yet I don't mind betting you could do it?"

"I made the coat I'm wearing to-night." She had fallen into his little trap.

"Did you, by Jove! I thought it was 'Paris.'" In his voice was a note of sympathy and his eyes watched her eagerly. "If I were a girl and hard up I should go in for that sort of thing. Designing frocks or making them." He dared not venture nearer the truth.

Isoël stared ahead. A faint smile was on her lips.

"You'd soon get tired of it, I think."

Again he was disappointed. If his theory had been correct she would have seized the opening. He had made it very easy for her. His brows contracted at her evasion.

She was ashamed of the old life. But why? A lady born and bred would not have been so sensitive over the manner of her employment. There was some mystery in her silence. *Was* there a lover behind the

scenes? He remembered Mrs. Serocold's words. "Of course they're all run by men!"

Meanwhile they had approached the landing-stage at the Lido. The gondola drew up.

"Here we are. Would you care to get out for a little stroll?" he suggested.

She looked about her curiously.

"Is it another island?" she asked.

"Yes, the El Dorado of bathers. A pity the weather isn't yet quite warm enough for the water. It's great fun in the summer. Will you come out and explore?" He wanted her, to himself, away from the gondolier.

"If you like." She was interested.

"Well, I promised you an adventure!" His manner had changed, less respectful, and he spoke with the old careless assurance. Now he looked more like the man who had dined with Tory Serocold. He sprang out and gave her a hand.

"There! Now for the silver sands. Come along!" They started off.

The gondolier watched them out of sight, then settled himself among the cushions, closing his eyes blissfully. He gave the pair an hour at least, no novice in these delicate matters!

Talking lightly, they made their way, at a brisk pace along the shore, descending the gentle slope of sand that glistened in the bright moonlight.

"*Look* at the shells!" She ran forward and sank on her knees, hands outstretched. "Why, there are thousands of them here! Just like the necklaces in Venice!"

He stood over her, watching her, amused by her simple pleasure. The veil had drifted back from her hair which was blown about her excited face. She looked like some happy innocent child, storing treasures in her lap.

"Like them?"

"*Je crois bien!*" As ever, when greatly stirred, she reverted to her native tongue. "They're made of real mother of pearl!"

At last she paused from her exertions and stared out across the sea.

"Isn't it still? Not a sound! Even the ripples hold their breath. Those hills, now, are they capped with snow?"

"I don't think so." He sat down on the sand by her side. "It's a little too late in the season for that. It must be just a trick of the moon. The Euganean hills. I once explored them. But I think they're lovelier at a distance. Like most women." He added, smiling, "But not all. That's where you score!"

"I?" She raised her delicate brows.

"Yes, you. A mystery that grows deeper as one approaches. Shall we play truant one of these days and go across to the mainland? There's a little town over there," he pointed to the distant range, "tucked away on a rocky shelf with a monastery perched above it. You would have to get up rather early and prepare for a long expedition. I don't know when we should get back!"

"It sounds too far," she said wisely. "Besides I'm quite contented with Venice."

She put up her hands and tidied her hair, then pinched each ear-ring to see it was safe. They reminded him of their first meeting in gloomy London, and he smiled.

"Well, then, Chioggia?" He wanted to feel he had got her away for a long day, without interruption.

She was running the fine silvery sand through her fingers and suddenly she pounced on a larger shell and added it to the heap on her lap.

"What a child you are!" He was rather annoyed that she had not risen to his suggestion. "What are you going to do with all those? You can't transport the whole beach."

"I wish I could," she laughed back. "And the sea and the hills, and the moonlight too."

"You needn't leave me out of it so conspicuously. It hurts my feelings." He was sprawling now in the soft sand, his elbow driven into it, his face propped upon his hands within a few inches of her knee.

"Oh, you could find your way for yourself!"

"Thanks!"

"Or, if you're really anxious to help, you can lend a large handkerchief and I'll carry my treasure home in

it. With knotted corners, ever so chic! It will look like a workman's dinner!"

She was very happy here to-night, too contented to act a part. She had never liked Doran better and she gave herself up to the charm of the hour.

"What will you give me in return?"

"The largest shell." She held it out and placed it in his open hand.

He closed his fingers, but too late. He had meant to hold more than the gift. She realized his intention and laughed with a teasing ring.

"You shouldn't grab. It's not polite. You should take it gently and say 'Thank you.'"

"Then give me another?"

"No. *One*. For a good boy! Two for a girl. That's chivalry; they deserve more."

"It's too Gallic for my mind. All or nothing is my creed." He smiled, with a twist of the lips.

"But you're not very honest." Her eyes danced. "Where's that *mouchoir* you promised me?"

He felt for it in his coat pocket and drew out — a pair of gloves!

"Hullo!" He stared at them. They were of pale grey *suède* and a long end dangled down.

Isoël stared too, then laughed.

"You take a very small size."

"Yes, don't I?" He felt caught. For they were Tory Serocold's. He tried to carry it off lightly. "I remember now. Some friends of mine were dining with me the other night and they left these behind on the sofa. I meant to return them the next day."

Isoël was mischievous.

"Quite sure you didn't win them?"

The arrow flew straight to the mark. Doran could have shaken her.

"No such luck!" He laughed with an effort. For the spoils of war could not cover the loss, in more than money, of that night. He knew he had been neatly caught even as he wrote the cheque.

Isoël idly fingered the gloves, aware of a mystery. She, too, felt slightly piqued. Here was a fair and un-

known rival. A mischievous notion appealed to her. "We could use them to carry the shells home. See—" She fastened the pearl buttons and poured her treasures into one. "Doesn't it make a fine little sack?"

Suddenly she bent her head.

"Why, they're scented! How nice for the shells. Violets! No, something stronger. Smell!" She held out the novel bag.

The perfume roused memories, and the poison of Tory's insidious speech still rankled in Doran's mind. The moonlight and the girl's charm made his pulses beat faster. He leaned towards her dangerously near. And suddenly his control snapped.

"Isoël — you little witch!" His arms went round her, he drew her down.

Instinctively she threw herself back, pushing him off with desperate hands.

"No, No!" She struggled up, the shells scattering right and left. "How dare you?" She stamped her foot. "*Mon Dieu!* I did not think it of you!" There was no mistake about her anger.

"I'd dare a good deal more for a kiss!" He hardly knew what he was saying, in the heat of the moment.

Her lip curled. She seemed to grow taller still in her injured pride. Then without another word she turned and began to ascend the slope, with a firm step, her head high.

He watched her go with a stubborn anger. Regret was to follow later. Now the main idea in his mind was a sense of being cheated out of his rights.

One of Clotilde's *mannequins* — Heavens! What did the girl expect?

He raised himself slowly on one knee and something crushed beneath his weight.

It was one of Tory's gloves, half filled with the fragile shells.

"Oh, *damn!*" He spurned it aside and with the action his storm-cloud broke. He laughed. The thing looked so absurd; the fingers knobby and outspread, the limp arm of pale *suède*. And how furious she would be!

He hunted round for its fellow and thrust both into his pocket, then started in pursuit of the girl.

She walked quickly. He noticed again her fine carriage and rounded limbs. A wisp of gauze above her hair floated out on the breeze and it reminded him of a little figure, a *Tanagra*, which his dead father had prized. She had the same note of youth, of slender strength and unstudied grace.

Exquisite but cold, he thought. Anyhow she was not "*that* sort!" Mrs. Serocold had been wrong. The *mannequin* without morals would not have repulsed him so roughly. Her surprise and virginal resistance had shown him, now that he considered it in a sober mood, that she was not accustomed to light treatment at men's hands. A certain respect grew in his heart as he quickened his steps to catch her up.

It would mean an apology, of course, and if she could not be appeased a distinctly unpleasant voyage home. For theirs was the only gondola.

A bell pealed out from a campanile. Twelve o'clock? Good Lord! He must smuggle the girl in somehow. He began to feel responsible.

What a pace she was putting on? He made a spurt and reached her side.

"Miss Dark?" He spoke breathlessly.

She made no response, head averted.

He tried again and suddenly choked. Damn it all! He was going to cough. In vain he struggled with his foe.

At the ominous sound Isoël paused. She tried to stifle the pitiful impulse invading her anger and wounded pride. Yet her face softened and she waited.

The fit was of short duration but his voice was hoarse when he tried to use it.

"Please forgive me," he gasped out. "I can't say—how sorry I am."

Something stirred in her cold young heart at the sight of his physical distress.

"That's — all right." Under her skin the blood rushed up to her little ears. The words had cost her mighty effort.

Doran saw this and felt ashamed.

"You're awfully kind. I don't deserve it. I'd no business —" He stopped short. "But I'll swear it shall

never happen again. If you won't throw me over altogether."

Isoël smiled faintly. The rôles were reversed with a vengeance.

"I think we ought to be getting back." She changed the subject deliberately.

"Yes. But will you shake hands first?" His eyes were wistful, his manner awkward.

She complied, but a shade reluctantly. For a long moment he studied her face, shy, yet proud and independent.

"She's as straight as a die!" he said to himself. A strong feeling of relief followed the thought. By a paradox he found himself gloating over the fact. Tory was wrong from first to last. Just like those society women! Judged every one by themselves. Why, this girl could give Tory points, in every way. And as to *morals!*

He almost whistled. Then pulled himself up. He was still sore from the encounter with that astute and provocative lady. He knew he had made a fool of himself. Thank God, it had gone no further! She had no future claim on him.

He glanced sideways at Isoël. She was walking along, lost in dreams. Where were her thoughts, the man wondered.

With the halo of gauze round her head, her pale face and serious eyes, she might have been, in that misty light, a young saint from a picture by Lippi.

He felt a sharp stab of remorse. She was too good for a man like him! He had taken advantage of her youth and the trust she reposed in him.

For forgiveness, ungrudging and offered freely, holds in itself the germs of revenge, rarely apparent to the donor but restoring the lost spiritual balance. And Doran suffered in his turn.

They found the gondolier at his post, a cigarette between his lips, the cushions neat and all in order.

Doran told him to row quickly, and refreshed by his stolen sleep he bent to with a vigour.

In silence they listened to the ripple of water stirring under the bows, and watched the high silver prow cut its way through the night. The moon had been swallowed up by a cloud and the air felt cold in the semi-darkness.

Isoël shivered and buttoned her coat. Doran had fresh misgivings.

"I shall blame myself if you get a chill. I wish you'd put my coat on too?"

"But I'm quite warm," she reassured him. "And you ought to be careful, with that cough."

"Oh, it doesn't matter what happens to me." He was caught up by the Furies that follow so close on the heels of reckless man. The cold added to his depression.

"Of course it does. Think of your friends."

"Are *you* one?" He whispered the query.

"Yes. Only—" She shrugged her shoulders. "You might have known."

"I do, now." A swift and sharp curiosity that was half a fear invaded his mind. "Has no one—?" he dared, and left it at that.

"No—*never!*" Her pride was in arms. "*Ma foi!* I was not brought up so. Besides, I vowed—" She broke off, seeing the pitfall under her feet.

"Yes?" His voice was very gentle. "Tell me? To show that I'm forgiven."

She seemed to consider for a moment. Then she took her courage in hand.

"Only, that I never would. Until—" she faltered, "*the* man."

"The man you marry?" His face was grave.

"Yes. If I do." She tried to laugh.

"He'll be a lucky devil," said Doran with a sudden bewildering pang of envy.

A little silence fell upon them. Doran's brain was forcing him into a swift analysis of the odd tumult in his heart.

Why shouldn't she marry? Most natural. And what had it to do with him?

Feeling the salt nip of the wind he sheltered his hands in his pockets. "And they're out of mischief there," he thought, "and out of sight!" He remembered the scars.

War. How far away it seemed! It was funny how he had settled down these last weeks to this inaction which had seemed at first unbearable.

The gondola swerved round. Doran had made a discovery.

"Oh, here are your shells." He drew out a mangled glove, gritty with sand. "You'd better take them as they are. I shall have to present a new pair. I tore the fellow one to this."

"I'm not depriving you?" She laughed.

"*Au contraire!*" He mimicked her. It was a pet expression of hers.

They slid under the last bridge.

"Here we are! I'm afraid it's late. You must let me see you safely in. You can't turn up at this hour alone. Hullo!" He peered, surprised, through the gloom. "There's another gondola at the door! Luggage too — the night train. You'll be able to slip in behind them."

"Isn't that lucky?" Isoël was feeling rather nervous herself. "I thought I might have to ring up the porter."

She stepped out after him, drawing her veil about her face.

A voice rose from behind the trunk:

"Now then, mind how you go! Once you're safely in the house, I'll see to all the baggage."

"But, Judy dear," came a faint bleat.

Isoël gripped Doran's arm.

"It's Miss Dalgleish." Her face whitened.

"Good Lord! D'you know her?" He surged forward impetuously. "Hullo, Judy! Who'd have thought it?"

She gasped and gripped his outstretched hand.

"*Francis!*" By all that's holy! Rising like Venus from the foam!"

"Steady on!" Doran chuckled. "You'll shock Miss Dark."

Judy stared.

"Why, so it is! Glad to meet you. Still here, at the Cats' Home?"

"Jolly good name for it." Doran laughed. "They've been scratching hard. But Judy will tackle 'em!" He slapped her upon the back. "Good old Judy! Going strong?"

It was a most indecorous scene.

"Rotten!" Judy heaved a sigh from the depths of her flat waistcoated chest. "Bella developed influenza and

there we were, stuck at Verona, in a stuffy hole that breathed of garlic. What have you two been up to to-night?"

She looked at them with twinkling eyes.

"Nothing very dangerous." Doran replied rather quickly. "A concert party round the corner. I was escorting Miss Dark home and wondering how we should break in. The pussy-cats go to bed early. You might take her under your wing and save her damaged reputation?"

"Righto!" Judy winked. "Now, be off. I must see to the luggage or Beppo'll want more macaroni! And where's Bella? In the canal?"

"I'm here, dear," said a voice in the doorway.

Judy stumped across the pavement with a parting shout.

"What's your address? Come and look me up to-morrow. I won't ask you to a meal until I see how they can cook."

"I will. I'm at Danieli's." He turned, still laughing, to Isoël and lowered his voice. "Mad as ever! But a dear. I've known her all my life. Now you'll have some one decent to talk to! I'm so glad. She'll stand by you. I think I'd better be moving along." He smiled down into her face. "You're all right?" She nodded her head. "Then good night — Isoël."

"Good night, Mr. Doran."

"Ah, no."

She understood. Although for nearly a week now he had called her by her Christian name, she had never yet used his, shy in her inexperience.

"Francis," she supplemented.

His face changed. He murmured something, too low for her to catch. Then abruptly he turned round and stepped into the gondola.

CHAPTER XV

"JUDY dear, may I come in?" Bella tapped at her sister's door. "Not to disturb you, if you're busy, but there's something I want to say to you." She appeared, plaintive, on the threshold, and cast a nervous eye at the windows which were both of them wide open. "Dear me, what a draught!"

Judy rose from her writing-table and closed the one near the arm-chair.

"What is it? You're not ill?" Despite her brusque "manly" ways she was really attached to her sister, and she gave the latter an anxious glance before she removed her monocle.

"No. Though I have a touch of neuralgia. I shall take two tabloids of aspirin." Bella accepted the proffered seat and smiled fondly as Judy dragged a pillow off her own bed and tucked it behind the sufferer's back.

"There, old chap, is that better?"

"Thank you, dear. You're very thoughtful." She settled herself comfortably; like a series of little waves, her double chin the last ripple. She had a way of lying back which secretly annoyed Judy who, well-drilled and energetic, rarely gave way to lounging habits.

"Something wrong with her backbone. Curves out instead of in," was her thought at the present moment. "Or she wears her stays wrong side about."

Bella was gazing into space, with a vacant look in her pale blue eyes. Half her waking hours were spent in a species of mental coma.

"Well?" Judy's voice was sharp.

"Oh!" Her sister gave a start. "Dear me, what was it? Oh, yes, I know. About Miss Dark. I came to give you a little hint. If I were you, Judy dear, I shouldn't get *too* intimate."

"It's not a habit of mine," said the other. "I'm hardly given to gushing, eh?" She laughed, throwing her shoulders back, her hands deep in her big pockets.

"No, dear, I shouldn't say so." Bella spoke absently. Then she roused herself again. "What I really meant to express, though I put it rather stupidly, was that one must be a little careful."

"What on earth are you driving at?" Judy scowled, plainly impatient. She stood now in front of her sister, staring at her with the hopeless intention of bringing her quickly to the point. "Out with it! What's wrong?"

Bella rubbed the plump fingers of her left hand with her right and straightened a worn mourning ring before she took up the challenge.

"Well, a little bird told me —"

Her sister gave a scornful laugh like the bark of an irritated terrier.

"I'm not an ornithologist! I don't understand bird-language."

The elder Miss Dalgleish tittered.

"How funny you are!" She smoothed a piece of crumpled frilling round her wrist. "I hardly like to mention names, but it was Miss Percival."

Judy nodded.

"Go on."

"She told me, in strict confidence—" Bella's voice was mysterious —"that Miss Dark was not what she *seems*."

"H'm. The usual formula. Occult and lacking in common grammar." Judy relinquished hypnotic methods and perched herself on the edge of the table. "She's too pretty, I suppose?" A malicious twinkle was in her eyes.

"Yes — no, what do you mean? It's her people. They're rather impossible." Bella fidgeted with her brooch.

It was pinned crookedly, as usual. Whatever she wore held the same impression of nervous haste, from her scanty hair, shedding its "invisible" pins, to the hem of her skirt which was generally turned up at the back where it drooped.

To Judy, scrupulously neat, these lapses were a perpetual eyesore.

"You've got a hairpin falling out. Just behind your left ear. No, that's another. They hunt in couples. Got him!" She gave a sigh of relief. Then she returned to

the old subject. "I don't see that her people matter. They aren't here, and I like the girl. She's quite clever and amusing and knows how to put on her clothes."

"But nobody speaks to her," said Bella. "I noticed that when we first came."

"Your 'little bird's' fault, perhaps? How I hate this infernal gossip!"

"I *wish* you wouldn't use such words." Bella shook like a tired jelly. She was roused to virtuous indignation. She added in a pleading voice, "I'm quite sure you get misjudged in consequence. I've noticed it. So *do* try, Judy dear. It's really not ladylike."

"What a goose you are! Look at me. *Could* I be 'ladylike'?"

Judy slid down off the table and stood squarely before her judge. This spring-like morning she had donned a waistcoat of pale canary and a starched shirt with a high collar, gripped by a neat black tie. Her coat of "heather-mixture" tweed fell loosely from her shoulders and beneath it appeared a narrow skirt that just covered the tops of her boots.

Bella's watery blue eyes ran over her hopelessly.

"It's difficult," she admitted.

The other accepted it as a compliment.

"Glad you agree with me for once! Now, if you're quite happy there, I'm going out to buy some stamps."

She picked up her Homburg hat and dragged it over her crisp hair, cut short like a man's, but thick and inclined to wave. It was iron grey, white at the temples and almost black on the crown of her head, and it gave to her clean-cut powerful face a certain aristocratic touch.

She turned for a parting glance at the mirror and tilted the felt a shade to one side, shot out her cuffs and, satisfied, seized her walking-stick and gloves.

"But about Miss Dark," said Bella feebly.

"You leave her to me. I don't expect she'll lure me from the paths of virtue. I'm not a chicken!" Judy was off with a grin that showed strong white teeth.

Bella, as the door slammed, closed her eyes with a little sigh. It bespoke a duty faced and accomplished, always a strain to her weak nerves. In her heart she admired her younger sister who chaffed and bullied her when she

was well but nursed her devotedly when ill. She leaned on the strong personality of this woman who seemed half a man and saved her from thinking of ways and means, that problem of the old maid.

"I think I will take a little nap." She sank still lower in the chair. But her thoughts flew back to Isoël Dark with provoking lucidity. "A pretty girl. It seems a pity. Still one has to be careful in these places, as Miss Percival pointed out. I think it was very kind of her."

Meanwhile Judy was following a totally different line of thought. She had noticed herself how every one gave the girl the cold shoulder. But, accustomed to a wandering life, she knew on how frail a thread depended popularity in the narrow circle of a *pension*.

Although she professed to despise her sex — above all, the "womanly woman," self-centred and suspicious of every one's virtue but her own — she was staunch where she made a friend. Isoël had appealed to her after their first passage of arms by the frank way she had responded to Judy's casual overtures. Nothing narrow-minded there! A shade artificial perhaps, but then a girl as pretty as that could be pardoned a few airs and graces. And she was shrewd enough to detect beneath the little mannerisms a nervousness which appealed to her, ever a champion of the weak.

Weak, that is, not in character, but in contrast to those in power. Doran's hint had not been wasted. The girl needed a protector.

For Isoël's confidence that night had been more than justified by facts. Even Mrs. Fortescue treated her latterly with reserve. She learned to dread the long meals, aware of her subtle isolation, always harder to bear in a crowd, and the evenings in the stuffy *salone* where she sat alone, over her sewing, and felt curious, smiling glances levied at her from the groups around.

If ever she joined one of these it seemed to dissolve and re-form later on the other side of the room. The Percivals were insolent, openly, on all occasions. They had won back Phipps to his allegiance. For this young man swam with the tide and Isoël was too proud to indulge in scraps of flirtation on the sly.

She guessed full well how matters stood and despised

the smiling satellite. Phipps was very fond of his money. He had no objection to play the part of cavalier to the sleek matron in return for many a gondola ride paid for out of that lady's purse. Mrs. Percival understood that at her age a trim young man expected a certain remuneration in return for his " devotion "!

Occasionally, with an air of pride, Phipps would appear with a bunch of flowers or basket of fruit and lay them down tenderly at his charmer's feet. But he fought shy of Rosamund since the night when Doran had called. Behind his cherubic countenance he held a shrewd store of caution. He was friendly to both daughters, teased and flirted with them in public but avoided the chance of a *tête-à-tête* with the stormy young person he once had admired.

And Rosamund by some inverted reasoning, blamed Isoël as the cause of this change in his attitude. Before she came all had been well!

Altogether the situation had been one of strain for the lonely girl. She dared not approach new-comers and her courage sank day by day.

With the advent of Judy Dalgleish she had felt that her cup of sorrow was full. Why had she told that futile lie concerning Lady Manister?

She had been careful to avoid Christabel Price and her aunt, Mrs. Reece, on her arrival; an easy matter since the pair had removed, shortly after, to a furnished studio lent by a friend.

But with Judy and her sheep-like sister it was a totally different affair. Isoël lived on the brink of disaster, within sight of her secret goal. Strangely enough the imminent peril roused in her the gambler's spirit. She staked anew on one wild throw. To subjugate and capture Doran.

The name held for her not love but security. Although, in the scene at the Lido, she had obeyed her instincts alone, she had done wisely and she knew it. He treated her now with marked respect.

Judy, too, became a refuge. Her breezy manner and the ring of her deep and mannish voice — above all, her friendliness — proved a tonic to the girl, wounded by petty, feminine spite. She realized that Judy saw how

completely ostracized she was yet refused to join the majority, true to her creed of "fair play."

For Isoël had not guessed that a part of her secret lay bare, nor the real nature of the gossip that played about her insidiously. She put down her lack of success to her lonely state and scanty knowledge of the ways of the world and to Rosamund's jealousy of her lover.

This morning she had slipped away to the picture gallery close by in order to write her first impressions of those works of art to Sir Abel Groot, unaware that during her absence Judy was fighting on her side a battle with the Percivals — those "little birds" marked down to her gun!

That staunch champion had been delayed by Miss Flinders in the passage.

"I hope you'll forgive me, Miss Dalgleish." The secretary pursed up her lips. "But Giuseppe came to me this morning and mentioned he'd had three pairs of boots to clean for you yesterday."

"Well?" Judy stood there, grim. "Isn't it a part of his duties?"

Miss Flinders bridled at this.

"Certainly. In moderation."

Judy was not in the mood to be lectured.

"Perhaps he didn't 'mention' the fact that I gave him a tip for his pains? I don't expect servants to work without proper remuneration."

"Oh, he didn't *really* complain," Miss Flinders coloured. "It was Miss East. Her shoes were left." She added sourly. "I suppose because he was cleaning yours."

"I don't see that it concerns me. I've nothing to do with the management. If there's a rule about the boots I shall stick to it. That's understood. Or if you like to make it an extra — 'in moderation' — I will pay it. Is that all?"

Miss Flinders collapsed.

"Yes, Miss Dalgleish, I think so. Quite."

"A wooden-headed Lowlander!" Judy muttered beneath her breath, with the contempt that centuries of conflict between the North and South of Scotland have bred in the stalwart race boasting the Highland blood in its

veins. "You've only got to rattle your purse, and down they go on their shin-bones. Expects me to wear dirty boots for the privilege of staying here! How I abominate these places! But Verona reduced the exchequer, with meals upstairs and doctor's bills, though I wouldn't let Bella guess for worlds."

She stumped on noisily. As she passed the *salone* door she saw that Rosamund stood by the window, the only occupant of the room. It reminded her of Bella's chatter. Why not sift that matter now? In she went with a cheerful:

"Good morning! You all alone?"

The girl turned.

"Oh, Miss Dalgleish!" She advanced, smiling. "How are you?"

"Fit as a fiddle! Your mother out?"

"Yes." Rosamund added slyly, "With Mr. Phipps in a gondola."

"And your sister playing gooseberry?" Judy gave a little chuckle. Her shrewd eyes saw everything. She flung herself into an arm-chair, stretched out her legs and surveyed her boots. "I should think she'd get sick of that."

Rosamund gave her a quick glance. Was this sympathy or chaff? She decided that it was the former and welcomed it in her present mood.

"Oh, she doesn't complain. It's 'copy,' you see." She drew up a little stool and settled down to a gossip. "I don't mind telling you, Miss Dalgleish, as I know you will keep it to yourself, that Celia is writing a book, and she's putting Mamma into it. It's going to be called 'Our Modern Mothers.' It's awfully clever, though somewhat daring. We think it will make a stir in Worcester!" She gave a cynical little laugh.

Judy, amused but a shade disgusted at the young girl's disloyalty, wisely disguised the fact.

"Make 'em sit up, what?" She grinned. "Your mother's a jolly good-looking woman. I suppose she likes to feel her power before it's too late: the dangerous age!"

Rosamund's guard was broken down.

"I call it disgusting!" she said hotly. "All these *boys* at her heels! If she wants to marry, why can't she choose

some elderly man and stick to him? Nobody would talk then. But Phipps! He might be her son. She makes a laughing-stock of herself and it's not very nice for Celia and me. Besides I'm vexed about my sister. There was a charming boy at Florence who was really quite keen on her until Mamma chipped in and pointed out that she was so 'lonely' as both her daughters neglected her and that Celia had a *shocking* temper! Enough to put any man off!"

Her hands were clasped round her knees, she rocked herself on the low stool, her passionate eyes surveying Judy, who nodded her head from time to time.

"It's all coming out in the book. Celia reads it to me in bed. Of course we make the mother dark, but every one will see through it."

"Is it your sister's first effort?"

"Yes, but it will go like wildfire! Not many novels are *real* life. Only, of course, it keeps her busy and so it's rather dull for me."

"Yes." Judy saw her chance. "There are very few young people here. Why don't you pal up with Miss Dark?"

"*That* girl? No, thank you." Rosamund's full and vivid mouth closed with a snap.

Judy whistled.

"Anything wrong with her?" she asked. "Seemed a good sort to me."

"I noticed you were rather friendly." This naïve admission tickled the listener. "And I wondered — I suppose you don't know all about her?"

"Can't say I do." Judy waited.

Out it came:

"She's not what she *seems*. She boasted to Mrs. Fortescue about her father, in the Navy. And Mrs. Fortescue told Mamma and Mamma told me. I was writing that afternoon to Uncle Roger, Papa's brother. He's an Admiral, retired now, but a regular walking Navy list, knows every one by name. So I thought I'd make a few inquiries. It seems that he'd met this Captain Dark. He came from a good family but was a notorious black sheep. Drank like a fish! Gambled too, and got turned out of the Service. Uncle Roger didn't know what had become

of him since then but he'd heard some rather funny stories. And he didn't think he ever married. I believe he turned up at his home somewhere in the West of England, a bachelor still, and then disappeared utterly. I should think they were thankful!

"But who is this girl who uses his name? Either she has no right to it or else—" She shrugged her fine shoulders.

"Or else what?" said Judy calmly. She drew out her cigarettes and lit one absently.

"Oh, well—" Rosamund giggled. "Perhaps she's what one might call a *foundling!* The worst of it was," she confided, "I only got Uncle Roger's letter the day after the Braces left. Oh, of course, you didn't know them. A stuffy old Colonel and his wife who thought an awful lot of themselves and took the girl under their wing. It would have been a lark to tell them!"

Judy waited for a moment and blew out a perfect ring of smoke.

"I see. And you condemn the girl for having had a bad father? Hardly sportsman-like to me."

Rosamund stared. The unlooked-for remark had been like a cold sponge thrown in her face.

"But one must—" she stammered. "After all—"

Judy interrupted swiftly.

"'The sins of the fathers'?" She slapped her knee. "Damned unfair, I've always thought it! One doesn't choose one's own relations. Otherwise one might do better. Though there'd be a lot knocking about unclaimed if that were the rule. 'Foundlings!'" She gave a bark that was intended for laughter. "But about Miss Dark. You turn her down for having a 'dip' in the family and for mentioning him in conversation. Has it ever occurred to your simple mind that she might not know the whole truth? She told me herself she was an orphan. He might have died when she was a baby."

"I don't see that it alters the case." Rosamund spoke very stiffly.

"No, you wouldn't." Judy grunted. She studied the flushed, disgusted face. "And how would you like it if some kind friend raked up your father's past? Some doubtful adventure of his youth?"

"*Really!*" The girl sprang to her feet. "I think you are going a little too far. To *suggest* such a thing! Her head went up proudly on her full throat. "My father was a Canon of Worcester."

A silence followed this explanation. She broke it by adding:

"And he's dead."

"So is Miss Dark's," Judy countered. She leaned forward and tapped the end of her cigarette against the fender to shake off the superfluous ash. Then she glanced at the tall figure lingering there, unwilling to leave the field of battle with lowered crest. "And is that all?" she asked sweetly.

"All? I should say it was enough." Rosamund sneered and moved off. "Miss Dark should be proud of such a champion!" Her manner was openly insolent.

"Well," said Judy easily, "I must say I admire her more than if she ran down her own mother. Shows grit, to my mind, to stick to your people, however unpleasant."

"I suppose she's glad to own any!"

Judy's face changed quickly. A glint came into her brown eyes. She pitched the end of her cigarette into the grate and sat bolt upright.

"Wait a minute!" she rapped out. "There's something you've overlooked. You're such a capable young woman that it rather surprises me."

Rosamund glanced back.

"Well?" She stood, a hand on the door.

"I think you'd better keep that closed. For your own sake," Judy suggested. She added, with a grim chuckle, "Other 'little birds' about," and without explaining that cryptic phrase went on with an eye on her victim, "Perhaps you've forgotten there's such a thing as libel in our English law?"

Rosamund gave an angry gasp.

"But I told you in *confidence*."

"Confidence be blowed!" said Judy. "Besides I shouldn't have secrets with you. In some ways I'm particular."

She smiled broadly. Rosamund choked.

Judy took up her sermon again:

"If Miss Dark heard this story, she could make it very

unpleasant for you. You seem to have taken it for granted that we met here for the first time.. That's another little error. It may surprise you to hear that this girl whom you charge with being illegitimate has some rather powerful connections. No, I'm not going to tell you the name for you to send to 'Uncle Roger'! But if they chose to take up the case not all the Canons in Worcester could save you!"

"I think you're *disgusting!*" Rosamund cried.

She was fumbling at the knob of the door. But Judy saw that she was frightened and followed up her advantage:

"You see, I'm not the only one you've honoured with your confidence, and you'd find if the whole thing came out that people would turn on you at once as their informant — the way of the world! People will listen to any gossip but they're very careful to point out that it didn't originate with themselves. It's simply the law of preservation." She had got now into her stride and her temper was cooling down. "So the best thing that you can do is to say that you were misinformed. Even admirals can make mistakes. I know, because my father was one."

The girl gave her a swift glance of surprise and intense mortification. Tears stood in the hot brown eyes. Judy suddenly felt a brute. She became more brusque and slangy than ever.

"Yes. You'd like to punch my head? Not sure I don't deserve it! But I'm damned sorry for Isoël Dark. You've made her life a perfect hell. And I like fair play. Always have! But I think you're a bit of a sport yourself and when you've considered it quietly you'll see you've made a bad break. I don't ask you to be friends but just to be civil to the girl and to keep a still tongue in your head. You'll find it pays in the end." She stood up, smiling now. "I'm sorry to speak so straight to you, as I daresay it hurts your feelings. But I like Miss Dark and I won't stand by and watch her hounded out of the place. I shall say nothing more about it if you'll take the whole matter in hand — you're clever enough to see it through. That's a bargain, between ourselves." She paused for a moment, and squared her shoulders as

though she had eased them of a burden. "I suppose" — her mouth took a humorous curve — "you'd consider it a gross insult if I asked you to shake hands upon it?"

For a moment, Rosamund hesitated. Something about this masculine creature with her clean-cut jolly face, now illumined with a smile, infectious and plainly friendly, appealed to the girl's stubborn heart.

Then the nobler impulse passed. She remembered the stinging reprimand and yielded to her inherent malice.

"*I* may be 'particular' too!"

Judy stared at her, then laughed. Rosamund, scarlet now, flung out and slammed the door. For in the laugh was no trace of anger, merely amusement, that fleeting surprise one sees in the face of a Great Dane when a toy terrier snaps at him.

Miss Dalgleish, left alone, suddenly recalled the fact that smoking was against the rules. She hunted for the betraying end of her cigarette and disposed of it by a neat shot at the canal through the single open window.

Then she threw the others wide and as the fresh air poured in she drew a deep satisfied breath.

"That's what they need," she decided. "Body and soul. A *stuffy* lot!"

CHAPTER XVI

ISOËL sat at a little table in her bedroom window, answering letters.

She was finishing one to Sir Abel Groot, principally concerning pictures, although she had drawn a playful sketch of her new friend, Judy Dalgleish.

I've been to the Accademia," [she wrote in her fine French hand, faithful to the pointed nibs beloved in her mother's country]. "You ask me about the Bellinis and which appeals to me the most. My favourite one is the lovely Madonna with little tree on either side. The Holy Child has such wonderful eyes; you can feel His greatness even then. But I don't care for the other you mention. (You asked me to say just how I felt.) I mean the Virgin with folded hands and the little Jesus fast asleep. He doesn't look safe; at any minute He might slip off the edge of her lap and I think a *real* mother would hold Him. But the clouds and the light behind are lovely!

"Of course one doesn't expect to like religious pictures so much as others, those that tell some sort of story. I still like Carpaccio's best. All the quaint little people, ever so busy, just like a play. I found another of his dogs in a painting with a wonderful bridge, and three together later on but, although I hunted everywhere, no more Basilisks! Were there really such creatures? Oh, and I do love the babies in a picture (I don't know the name) of a beautiful girl in a boat with a big globe held on her knee. One is blowing a tiny trumpet! I don't think it *can* be a sacred subject?"

This sidelight on the well-known "Venus, Ruler of the World" gave Sir Abel rare amusement when the girl's letter reached him.

"I'm having a perfectly lovely time. I can never thank you sufficiently."

She paused, her pen in the air, and referred to Sir Abel's brief epistle.

"You needn't chaff me about Mr. Phipps. I don't care for him a bit! What is he doing, idling in Venice? He ought to be fighting at the Front."

Here inspiration failed her and, with a flourish, she signed her name and blotted the page carefully.

"That's over! Hope he'll be pleased." Then she turned to a scrawl from Patty —" in great haste just going

out—" to say that she had met Anna who had asked for Isoël's address.

"She seemed very nice and friendly," [Patty wrote in her sprawling hand]. "Said she had some news of you, but I wasn't sure you wanted Clotilde to know exactly where you were. So I told her to send it care of Cook's. Wasn't that cute of your old pal? You'll find me smart when you return. I picked up a remnant cheap last week and Mrs. Brown on the third floor is making it into a spring dress. It's khaki-colour — all the rage! And she's trimming it with violet ribbon."

"Oh, Patty!" Isoël groaned. "I can picture it with your red hair."

The letter held a triumphant postcript.

"Bert has given me a bracelet. I really think he means business!"

Isoël smiled at this typical ending. Poor old Patty! She fully deserved a good husband and home of her own.

And she wouldn't be too particular. The "second-best"—she recalled the speech and felt an odd pang of envy succeeded by a little shudder.

Never! Better by far go down into the gulf of middle-age, unloved and unsought, than lower her standard, blotting out that fugitive dream of the "best in life."

She stared through the low window, set deeply in the walls and shaken now by a gust of rain.

For a storm had swept across the banks of sand that shelter the "bride of the sea" and Venice was wrapped in a drifting mist like an Eastern beauty beneath her veil.

A tap at the door made her start.

"Come in."

Judy stood on the threshold dripping wet with a cheerful face down which a little rivulet trickled from the limp brim of her hat.

"Can't!" she laughed. "You'd be swimming next! And Miss Flinders would haul me up for ruining her polished floor. Turn over one of those gaudy mats and heave it across. I'll stand on that."

Isoël, amused, obeyed. Once safe on the little island Judy gave herself a shake like a retriever after a plunge.

"It's heavenly out," she announced. "No one about and plenty of space. I tramped to the Public Gardens and on the way home I saw Doran gazing sadly out of his

window so I ran in and cheered him up. It must be galling for a man who's lived as he has to have to coddle! But he's keen on getting back to the Front and this makes him obey orders. Now I'll tell you what I suggested. That you and I should go round to tea. He's sending us his gondola at four on the chance. Are you on?"

She drew out a handkerchief, a vast bandanna, from her cuff and rubbed her face vigorously. "It'll just give me time to change."

"I should love to." Isoël brightened. "It's dull staying indoors all day and Fran — Mr. Doran must hate it."

"Why not say Francis at once?" Judy gave her jolly laugh. "Think it will shock me? Not much! I've known him since he was a schoolboy — wore Eton suits and revelled in buns! We lived not very far from them. My father was a pal of his, and many a jolly Sunday night we've spent in that old studio."

"Did you know his mother?" Isoël asked.

"No fear!" Judy snorted. She wheeled round. "I must go to Bella. She's having an afternoon in bed and feeling about her for stray pains. I think she's rather disappointed that she hasn't got a temperature. The chance of 'fever' in Italy is a perpetual excitement to her. All the same,"— she checked her mirth, "she's not a bit strong, really. Ever since a nasty knock she had as a girl. I don't remember if I told you. The man she loved killed himself. They'd been engaged just a year."

"No." Isoël gave a shudder. "How terrible! Purposely?"

"Afraid so. He was deep in debt. He shot himself in the train on the way to join his regiment after a last futile attempt to raise the money up in town. I'll never forget how good old Doran — the painter, I mean — was to her. She simply lived in his studio and it must have been a drag on his work as Bella's ideas on Art are *rotten!* She used to sit at his elbow watching him — and offering advice! He painted a portrait for her later from a photograph of poor old Cecil and gave it to her. I really believe it helped her to pull through. He wouldn't take a penny for it and they were cruelly poor then. He was a splendid old chap, awfully handsome, as tall as Francis with a head like a lion and the heart of a child —

up to the day of his death. How that beast, Lady Caroline, could have treated him in the way she did is utterly incomprehensible! Yet he never would hear a word against her. That's *love,* if you like! I suppose it made him sorry for Bella. For she worshipped the ground that Cecil trod on. A great mistake." Judy frowned, then glanced sideways at Isoël. "It's a warning! Never fall so deeply in love that you can't keep your head above water."

With this involved metaphor, she stumped out and banged the door.

Isoël remained standing by the inverted mat which showed traces of muddy boots. She was pondering on the last words.

"It's not likely," she said to herself. "Sometimes I wish I could!"

For she knew that she did not love Doran. She liked him and felt thrilled by his gallantry at the Front and the long loyalty to his father. He was the object of her ambition but he had not succeeded in touching her heart. And at times a chill dread seized her. She would have to live long years with him, a wife, in all that it implied, and the gift of her body without her soul frightened and bewildered her.

Then the memory of her vow in the quiet chapel at St. Mark's tinged the fact with that fervid romance which stood to her for religion. In the light of her promise to the Virgin she felt that strange conventual charm which "sacrifice" brings to natures as deeply feminine as hers, reared in the mystical atmosphere of the Roman Catholic Church. She had never probed beneath its surface for the strength and purpose of religion. She breathed in the fragrant incense but saw no further than the symbol.

Now, as she moved about the room, brushing the trim little hat, hunting for gloves and handkerchief, her spirits rose. Life was sweet! And again the spell of ambition claimed her exultantly.

She knew that the man's attitude had changed. At times it perplexed her. His silences when they were alone, his scrupulous care to avoid her touch, the way his eyes dwelt on her and turned aside when she glanced up, his wistful anxiety to please her.

Was this love? Isoël wondered.

In her serene inexperience she had not realized that a man rarely flirts when he is in earnest and is seldom seen at his best.

For Doran was hard hit. He knew it and resented it. Yet he could not keep away from her. His brain and his heart were at loggerheads. It was the first time in his life that passion had been subordinated to a nobler feeling, akin to respect.

He was torn asunder between the knowledge that here was no fit wife for him by the recognized standards of his class and a reckless desire to know the worst — and marry her in the teeth of it!

If only she would confide in him. Prove that her character was sound — albeit reserved — he could forgive her lowly status and lack of social experience. It was this playing with the truth that cautioned him at saner moments. He reasoned — and knew he was in the right — that love must have a firmer basis.

And at these times the far-off war, the scenes of grim realism lived through in the trenches, called to him irresistibly.

That was a man's life.

This? He shrugged his broad shoulders. He would go away and forget her; put her for ever out of his heart.

If only his strength would return!

Like Samson shorn, he cried in his soul for one more fight to the death; to go down, a man among men, freed from the weakening spell of a woman.

. . . . . .

They arrived at the Hotel Danieli and were shown up to their host's room. He had tidied it in masculine fashion, all the superfluous papers and pipes piled neatly on a chair, a pair of slippers thrust into the corner; and he gave them a warm greeting.

"This *is* nice. You're bricks to come! We'll have tea up at once. I sent out for some cakes but I don't know if they've got 'em. I believe every one goes to bed when it rains in this country."

Isoël was looking about her. Her eyes fell on the mantelpiece.

"Why, you've kept that big shell?"

"Rather! My prize. 'One for a good boy.'" He was always easier with her in the presence of a third party. "I found it was a little too large to wear as a locket round my neck."

She laughed.

"I tried to pierce mine and broke every needle I possessed, ruined a hatpin in the candle and then gave it up in disgust."

"You want a proper drill," said Judy.

"Never mind." Doran smiled. "It shall have its reward! I'd quite forgotten." He pulled out an untidy drawer and produced from a box a string of shells, of an iridescent greenish colour and returned to her side. "I meant to give you these before but they had such a silly useless clasp I looked about for another one."

Isoël hesitated. Judy stepped into the breach.

"Don't be a goose and say you '*never* accept gifts from gentlemen'!" Her jolly laugh cleared the air.

"I won't. I'll say 'Thank you kindly'!" She was learning the ways of the world. Her face was a little flushed for Judy's quite innocent fun had saved her from a false step.

"It will match that green umbrella of yours." Doran watched her unfasten the catch and examine it with widening eyes.

"How pretty it is. But *far* too good!"

Judy bent over the trophy. Inwardly she was surprised. For the string of shells was hardly worth one of the little round pearls that encircled a pale emerald set with the cunning of days long past.

"It's a shocking stone," said Doran quickly. "I told the man I thought it was glass. But he answered, without turning a hair, that the *flaws* proclaimed it genuine! Seemed a funny guarantee. Put it on."

She attempted to do so but as she swung the string over her head it caught on the brim of her hat.

"One minute!" Clumsily he rectified the mistake, and his fingers grazed the girl's neck, bare above the simple blouse.

Judy, lazily watching the pair, saw the blood surge up under Doran's bronze skin. She turned away with a brusque movement.

"I'm dying for tea." She spoke at random. So that was how matters stood? Poor old Francis. Caught at last! But was the match good enough? She thrust aside the disloyal thought. For the lonely girl attracted her. Perhaps it would not come to that? Anyhow it was not her business.

The host was apologetic.

"They always take their time here."

"A case of '*subito*'?" Isoël smiled. "I've learned the meaning of that, to my cost. Venice is an education."

It certainly had been to her.

"Any more adventures?" asked Doran. He regretted the words as soon as uttered, remembering how he had promised her one at the Lido — and kept his word!

"Yes, heaps!" She settled herself in the angle of the sofa where Tory, in the name of love, had cleverly played a game for money. "The most startling of them all happened after lunch to-day. Miss Rosamund Percival offered to lend me an ancient novel."

Judy felt a secret triumph.

"I hope it was proper?" she inquired.

"I've only read the first chapter. It's 'The Woman that Thou gavest me.'"

"Sounds like a wedding present," said Judy, who disdained novels. "One of those that people exchange with a dozen clocks for a set of fish knives." She pulled out her cigarettes. "This allowed in your boudoir?"

Doran nodded.

"Have one of mine? Unless you prefer to smoke a pipe."

"Well, I've done that — at a pinch!" said Miss Dalgleish composedly. She sat down sideways on a chair leaning her arms on the back of it.

Doran held out a lighted match.

"Mind your fringe," he said wickedly. "I don't want to set fire to it."

Judy grinned.

"It wants cutting. Who's the best barber here?" She did not wait for his answer but went on with a chuckle, "I had an awful time in Milan. I think I must sink my personal pride and tell you that wild adventure." She

inhaled a deep breath of smoke and let it escape through her nostrils.

"Do." Doran scented mischief. "Did Figarro make love to you?"

"No fear! Have you got an ash tray?"

"I use the carpet. It makes 'em brush it."

"Righto! Well, to resume my narrative — Bella would approve that phrase — I strayed into a big saloon full of sleek-headed sirens being waved for the evening. Rather amusing, some of their talk; but that's not the point of the story. I explained that I wanted a close cut, as my hair grows so frightfully fast, and a shampoo, and when the man had done this he left me to dry in front of one of those hot air things. Picture my horror when he returned with a tray full of grey wigs — 'transformations,' I think they call 'em — and before I could say 'Jack Robinson' he'd clapped one down over my ears." She paused, enjoying their hearty laughter. "I've never been so mad in my life, and the worst of it was the oily brute couldn't speak a word of French and my Italian is very rocky. I could see him, you know, in the glass, squirming about, waving his hands and giving little darts with a comb, his mouth half-full of hairpins. I looked just like an old ram, with two curls standing up on either side of my head, and when I tried to get it off — the beastly thing was full of springs — he misunderstood and added on top an erection like a tea-pot handle! The sirens meanwhile had all turned round, deeply thrilled, to proffer advice. I wonder I got out alive!"

"Oh, stop!" Isoël was weak with laughter. She dried her eyes. Doran had collapsed beside her.

"Isn't she a *treat?*" he whispered.

"Oh, it's all very well for you," said the victim. "But it cost me a pretty penny."

"You never bought one?" Isoël choked.

"I'd have bought the whole bally shop, to get out of it decently, so I compromised in the end with a bottle of somebody's hair-restorer. He wouldn't let me off for nothing and powders and paints weren't in my line. He had the sense to see *that!* It had a picture of Lady Godiva on it, clad in the usual way. He pointed it out

with a hopeful expression and a gesture which reached to his knees. So I brought it home and gave it to Bella. She *was* so pleased! And she said 'Oh, Judy dear, how *thoughtful*." The speaker gave a bark of delight. "She uses it religiously, though it smells like the Civet Cat House!"

Here the waiter appeared with the tea and the trio drew up to the table. It was a most hilarious meal. Judy had certainly broken the ice if that had been her intention. Doran had recovered his spirits.

"Tell us some more of your adventures?" he suggested to Judy after a little.

"No, it's Isoël's turn now." She used the girl's Christian name for the first time and received in return a glance of pleasure from the owner.

"I can't think of one at the moment." She sat facing Miss Dalgleish, her chin propped on her hand. Doran's eyes were fixed upon the curve of her arm and the delicate wrist. How perfect she was, from head to foot! Surely she must be well-born with those slender hands and arched insteps? There was not a plebeian note about her.

She felt his gaze and glanced up. He looked away guiltily. Judy broke the little silence.

"I've remembered something, if you'd like it."

"Do tell us." The others' voices rang out in unison.

"Link little fingers," laughed the girl. "And wish hard." Doran complied. "What did you wish?" She was curious.

"I shan't say, or it won't come true." He smiled, but his grey eyes were wistful.

She nodded. "Oh, I forgot that."

"I'll tell you, though, if it does. Are you satisfied with that compromise?"

"Yes." Her lids fell under his glance. It revealed more than he suspected.

"I know he cares," she said to herself. "It's coming all right, thanks to the Virgin. And I *felt* something would happen in Venice!" Golden dreams rose before her.

Doran, with an effort, turned to his other guest.

"Have some more tea, Judy? And then we're dying for the story."

"It's not about myself this time." She handed him her empty cup. "Lemon, please, and no sugar. It happened to a pal of mine. She was a thorough good sport, one of the original members of the old Pioneer Club. I believe she started a rational dress, used to go about at night with a crush hat under her arm. Suited her. She was tall and slight. But people weren't accustomed then to sense,—only sensibility! I'm speaking now of twenty years ago and she was getting on then. She generally had a little crowd of street urchins after her and it was worse on the Continent."

She paused to drink her last cup.

"Well, she happened to be on a walking tour in France off the beaten track. It was after the Franco-Prussian War and she halted at a little town not far from the frontier. She was dressed in her usual way—only more so." Doran smiled. "A hilly country and all that—no good being hampered by long skirts. She made a bit of a sensation and some one suggested she was a spy, a man disguised as a woman, and then there was the devil to pay! France was still sore and suspicious and the word 'spy' was quite sufficient. They mobbed her, and threw stones until the *gendarmes* interfered, marched her off to the *hôtel de ville* and sent in haste for the mayor.

"He decided she must be searched! You can picture Miranda's feelings? Luckily she kept her head and remembered that she'd got a letter from a brother of hers in the Home Office which might be useful at this crisis. It was in a blue envelope with O.H.M.S. printed across it, and she brandished it under the mayor's nose and threatened him with Britannia's wrath if he laid a finger on one of her subjects. The mayor pretended to read the letter and, inwardly frightened by the threat yet preserving his own dignity, made a favour of releasing her.

"But Miranda wasn't that sort of ass!" Judy gave a joyous chuckle. "She pointed out she had been insulted and detained upon a false charge. The least he could do in apology was to see her off with every honour and protected from further annoyance. Otherwise she intended to stay and communicate with the nearest consul. In the end, the mayor, very subdued, ordered his carriage and drove her himself through the town to the station. He

wanted to have the landau closed but this didn't suit Miranda!"

"Good for her!" cried Doran. "One can picture her bowing to the crowd, and the mayor, very stiff, at her side."

"Yes. But he scored in the end."

"How?"

"Well, it's rather painful. Just as the train was going to start, with a little crowd on the platform and the mayor in front, inwardly thankful to speed this disconcerting guest, Miranda, who was a thorough sportsman felt magnanimous and thrust out her hand to shake his. To her disgust he bared his head, stooped and kissed it! Oh Lord!" Judy groaned, "You should have heard her tell the story. She used to shout, still mad: 'And I hadn't time to box his ears!' Poor dear old Miranda!"

The listeners applauded.

"It must have been quaint," said Isoël. "I wonder if he knew he'd scored?"

"I shouldn't think so," laughed Doran. "It was just his Gallic chivalry. I should like to meet Miss Miranda."

"You can't. She's joined the majority." Judy rose from her chair briskly. "I believe it's stopped raining," she said, moving to the open window. "What a ripping view you have. You ought to make a charge for it!"

She gazed out at the scene before her, drinking in the fresh air.

The heavy clouds were rolling back, and between them and the sea the sky was visible, mistily blue like the shell of a blackbird's egg. Across it, in the path of the sun, lay a single feather of rosy light, astray as though it had dropped from the wing of an ibis on its homeward journey.

Judy's face was a little sad. She had reached the age when gaps appear in the ranks of early friends and although she would have scorned the notion that a single life was not the best, there were moments of chilly loneliness when the approach of the grim years of fading strength weighed on her spirits. She had no morbid fear of death but she dreaded the "last lap," as she called it, at the mercy of strange hands. For Bella, she knew, would go first.

Those two young people, now?

For a fleeting second she envied them. Then she turned upon herself. "Judy! You're getting senile, what you want is a brisk walk."

She called back to the pair.

"Let's go out. It's quite fine."

They agreed, a shade reluctantly. It was peaceful, sitting there, with the first soft glow of the sunset outside stealing into the dim room, and the odd safety that both of them felt in the presence of that sturdy friend. They could dare to dream, and look, and wonder.

Doran stood up with a yawn.

"Exercise, the Englishman's creed! We've made a little god of it, but it's seeing us through in this war. Though it's queer how all sorts of men, used to a sedentary life, get knocked into shape so soon."

Judy, hunting for her stick, flung back over her shoulder,

"That's because our hearts are in it. The Germans are trying to win by their brains but there's something more powerful even than science. With all their magnificent organizations they don't go singing into battle or dribbling a football before them. They're not sportsmen — not *clean* enough. They terrorize but they don't play fair and, although they pretend to be His relations, they forget the Almighty's a gentleman!"

"With which characteristic remark, she swept the lazy pair before her with a "Yoicks, for'ard!" that frightened a waiter taking a nap in the passage.

They turned to the right up the *riva* filling fast with the usual crowd of loafers and shawled women with children clinging to their skirts. At the corner of the Ponte di Paglia, an old crone, her grey hair tucked away under a scarf of faded colours, stood, busily selling some dainty from a basket propped on the parapet.

"What is it?" Isoël asked, as she saw a child reach up on tiptoe, a *soldo* out-thrust in its grimy paw and pop his purchase into his mouth.

"Like to try one? They're rather nice. Little figs dried in the sun with an almond cunningly introduced. I used to love them as a boy." Doran paused before the vendor.

"*Si, si. Buonissimo!*" She smiled at him with eyes like sloes in the weather-beaten, wrinkled face.

Doran's hand went to his pocket. He chaffed her in the dialect, to which she responded delightedly with a smiling reference to his teeth, showing her own withered gums, and followed it up with a local proverb that hails from the East — and is none too proper!

Doran laughed with a conscious glance at Isoël on the higher step, thankful she could not understand. He knew the custom the woman referred to. For in oriental countries a nut is a declaration of passion when offered to a member of the opposite sex, not necessarily including marriage. The Rabelaisian old lady had laid a stress on the almond's cunning concealment within the fruit.

"What is she saying?" asked Judy.

"She's envying us"— his eyes danced —"our healthy tastes. *La gioventù!*"

The crone nodded, catching the word.

"*Buon appetito!*" she wished him gravely.

He stood upon the lower step and suddenly a little hand in a neat suède glove fell on his arm.

"Why, there you are!" cried a gay voice.

He wheeled round. Mrs. Serocold was laughing up into his face.

"I haven't seen you for ages," she said. Then, as the others stared at her, she gave one of her childish pouts. "Oh, I didn't know you were with friends."

This forced him to introduce her. He did it most unwillingly. Would she recognize Isoël? He slurred a little over the name. But Mrs. Serocold glanced at the girl indifferently and turned to Judy.

"Surely we've met before? Years ago in Holly Walk. You and Mr. Doran fenced one Sunday night in the studio."

"It's quite likely." Judy smiled.

"And you beat him," laughed Tory. "I remember now, quite well. What are you eating?" She stared at the basket and the little rows of dried figs.

"Have one?" suggested Doran.

"No, thanks. They look sticky." She glanced down at her pale grey gloves, which matched her well-cut coat and skirt.

Isoël's eyes, following hers, narrowed. Was this the fair owner of that other pair, one of which still lay with the shells in her room? She recalled the incident at Cook's and a little germ of jealousy quickened in her ambitious heart, and added to the dislike she had felt at her first meeting with the lady. What a mercy she did not recognize her!

She bent forward and took another of the figs, which Doran held in a vine-leaf, and nibbled it like a young squirrel.

"They're so nice, full of surprises!" She smiled up into his face.

Mrs. Serocold noticed the action. Who was the girl? Her brows contracted. For, although she had carried out the project she had conceived in coming to Venice, she was getting very bored with the place, and Doran had failed her in other ways. At their next meeting after the night when the famous cheque had changed hands he had resumed his brotherly manner — which was not at all what she desired!

"Are you going my way?" She addressed Judy and they moved on up the broad steps, chatting together pleasantly.

Isoël and Doran followed in the warm silence that seemed now to enfold them when alone. The light of the sun, setting fast, stained the marble tracery of the Doge's Palace a delicate pink and ahead of them San Giorgio glowed as though lit with hidden fires. Boats stole home with golden sails, the corners gay with the signs of their guilds: here a cock with flaming comb and there a great rayed sun. The sea, deep blue with violet streaks, was as smooth as glass and about the whole wonderful picture a luminous mist rose with a Turneresque glory.

"Happy?" He looked at her.

"Who wouldn't be?" she said softly.

Even her skin, he noticed, was warmed by the pearly glow and her burnished hair had taken on a deeper shade. She made him think of Galatea, roused to life at the call of passion.

"I shall dream of this when I'm back in the trenches."

Her face changed at this reminder of the short time that remained for her purpose.

"You're not going just yet?"

The anxious note in her lowered voice pleased him beyond measure.

"In another fortnight," he replied, "I come up before the Medical Board."

"And then?"

"If they pass me for active service, back to France. At least, I suppose so. One can't tell. It might be Gallipoli. But I'm not counting on such luck." He sighed. "Although I'm much better I'm not *quite* sound yet. Still I hope they'll find me work at home or perhaps at the base abroad. I want to feel in harness again."

"Tired of Venice?" She spoke lightly but in her eyes was a shadow of pique.

"Never! It's been too perfect for that. If it weren't for this war I don't believe that I could tear myself away. I shall never forget some hours I've spent here."

They turned into the Piazzetta. Isoël's heavy lids were lowered.

"I shall miss the guide, the only one who did not murder all Romance!"

"Didn't he? I'm glad of that." He was fighting now for self-control. The dangerous hour of the sunset brought with it a subtle regret, the presage of what the parting would mean.

How could he go away and leave her? Yet it seemed the only thing to do.

"You'll send me a line to say where you are and the decision of the Board?" She spoke rather wistfully.

"Yes. Of course." His voice was husky.

The pair ahead had halted to look at the crowded Piazza and as they approached them Phipps strolled up and joined the group.

"What a bevy of beauty!" He shook hands gaily with Mrs. Serocold whom he had met before with Doran. He admired her smartness and light chatter.

"Completed by yourself, you mean?" Doran looked at him quizzingly. "Another suit! I begin to think you've an interest in a tailoring firm."

"It's the other side of the account, unluckily." Phipps

grinned. "That's why I bolted from town." He gave his high boyish laugh. "Writs falling like winter snows."

Isoël saw a glance pass between Mrs. Serocold and Doran, gay and intimate on her part, a shade supercilious on his.

She was sure that this was the fair unknown who had left her gloves in his keeping, and she wondered how much he cared for her and if her rival boded mischief.

Again she thanked the kindly saints who had saved her from recognition. But she must be careful and watch her speech. She felt nervous and self-conscious.

The seats were filling up quickly round the little tables in the Square, people taking *apéritifs,* or light beer as fancy dictated.

"It's not too cold to sit about, is it?" Doran asked the party. "Let's go across to the *Ortes Rosa* and have cocktails all round. They've started an American Bar."

Mrs. Serocold clapped her hands.

"Lovely! But I shouldn't have thought Venice was so civilized."

"Ah, you don't really know it," said Doran. He walked between her and Judy, relieved and yet cursing fate that his *tête-à-tête* with Isoël had been brought to a conclusion.

Ignoring Phipps, she was trying in vain to keep pace with Miss Dalgleish who had slipped a hand through her arm.

"Don't I?" Tory laughed. "I'm glad to learn there's anything new. The recognized entertainments suggest the Y. M. C. A. I went to the *Fenice* last night and sat through a dull opera, vilely mounted, with poor voices and the longest *entr'actes* I've ever known!"

"They do spin them out a bit," Doran assented.

They grouped themselves round two tables drawn together and after he had given the orders he reverted to his last remark.

"I've often wondered why they don't start *petits chevaux* in the *foyer* for amusement during the intervals. The Italians love any gamble." He glanced across at Isoël, who was looking a trifle bored between Mrs. Serocold and a rather silent Phipps, and drew her

into the conversation. "You'd enjoy that, wouldn't you?"

To his surprise, she looked troubled.

"No. I mean, I don't play cards." For although she divined it was a game, the words held no meaning for her. Roulette she would have understood, from those far off days at Monaco.

Tory turned and stared at her. Doran put in hastily.

"Why, you're mixing it up with Baccarat. They're generally twins at the Casino!" He guessed that she had never been to a gay French watering-place, and he went on rather foolishly, in his anxiety to help her, "You know, those artful little horses that go round and round in a circle and always 'have' you at the finish."

She made a wild shot in the dark.

"I'm afraid I don't go to races."

Mrs. Serocold gave a titter. Judy laughed openly.

"Good girl. Wish I didn't!"

Isoël's face was crimson now. What had she said? She caught Phipps behind his glass wink at her neighbour, that well-dressed lady by Doran's side.

The latter saw this by-play too. It roused in him a murderous instinct. For all his heart went out to the girl in an impulse of pity and protection.

How should she know? In that dreary life of a daily struggle for existence. It proved her innocence, he thought. He began to talk rapidly.

"This war has knocked racing hollow. I hear that at Epsom the Grand Stand is being taken over for Red Cross work and that there will be no Ascot this season. Rough luck on you frivolous people, eh, Tory?" His voice was malicious.

"Don't you let him bully you," said Phipps in a laughing aside. "These soldiers, Mrs. Serocold, think they can run the whole world."

Doran leaned across the table. His eyes were steely, a slight smile twitched the strong, mobile mouth.

"Well, you hold the remedy in your hands. Don't you, my dear fellow?"

Then, as Judy grinned broadly, he raised his glass and winked at her.

Isoël was well revenged.

Judy responded.

"Here's *to* them! Our brave boys everywhere." She gulped down the golden mixture, disdaining the use of straws. Then, with tact, changed the subject. "Amusing here, at this hour, isn't it?" she addressed them all. "Do look at that couple passing. I'm sure they're German honeymooners. Wooden advertisements of love! They remind me of those big dolls ventriloquists use at their entertainments."

"They *are* rather like marionettes. A rarity in Venice now. Germans, I mean," Doran explained. "Have you ever been to a little show at the back of the *Rialto* Market — the Marionettes Theatre?"

"No," said Judy. "What's it like?"

"Most amusing. You should see it. I'll take a box and we'll all go." He glanced round at his guests. He was regretting his sudden outburst. All right if he'd been alone with Phipps but in the presence of ladies — Now he sought to ease the strain. "You'll come?" He addressed Tory. "That's good! And you, Stacy?"

Phipps was not easily crushed.

"Thanks very much. If you're sure there's room."

"Heaps. If not, we'll have two boxes. Wait a minute before you bless me. The highest price for this luxury is five *lire,* all told!" He laughed at their surprised faces. "It's patronized by the populace, market-women and glass-blowers. I doubt if many English tourists even know that it exists. Hope you won't regret the bargain?"

"Can one smoke?" Judy enquired.

"Rather! Though the élite usually suck oranges."

Mrs. Serocold pouted at this.

"How does one dress?"

"Oh, my dear lady!" He shrugged his shoulders. "A black shawl and a stuff skirt, with a bright kerchief over your bosom. That's the regulation costume. But you wear your best pair of ear-rings." He glanced, smiling, at Isoël. "Yes — those." As she touched her own. "The very thing. You'll be the Queen."

She gave him a little grateful nod. For in his keen soldierly face she saw a tender understanding.

What a dear he was! For the first time she felt an impulse of affection that bordered on love and left her dazed a little by the strength of it.

The party broke up presently having fixed the auspicious night for the entertainment Doran proposed.

Mrs. Serocold and Phipps departed in a gondola, and the others proceeded on foot after settling the pair in their boat and chaffing them on the "elopement."

Isoël moved in a dream. Would he always protect her like this? But what a lot she had to learn! Now her ambitious schemes were tinged with a keen desire not to disgrace him. For she trusted profoundly in her star. He would marry her. She was sure of it. She longed to slip away and steal to the shrine of San Isidoro and steep herself once again in the sensuous side of her religion.

Meanwhile Mrs. Serocold was questioning Phipps.

Who *was* Miss Dark? Phipps hadn't the slightest idea. But in his customary fashion he sided with the lady's views.

Yes, a little *voyante* perhaps, but a pretty girl, no doubt of that!

No. She was quite by herself. He believed she had come straight from London.

Decidedly a rum mistake! He agreed that most people — well, of the sort one *knew* — had no illusions on the form of sport known as *petits chevaux!* Couldn't have knocked about much. Lived probably in the suburbs.

But old Doran was hard hit! One could see that with half an eye.

Miss Dalgleish was a character, but he had no use for suffragettes and all that, don't you know. He liked, as a rule, little women; smart and dainty, with plenty to say.

She drank it all in gaily. He made his intention obvious. They arrived, too soon, at her hotel. Mrs. Serocold demurred when he offered to pay the gondolier.

Phipps insisted. Then it transpired that he hadn't "change." Must "owe" it her.

Might he make it an excuse for calling one afternoon? He stood by her on the steps and added that he'd always wondered what this old palace was like inside.

Nothing loath she led the way into a hall where rocking

chairs and bamboo tables rewarded his thirst for archæological knowledge.

He offered her a cigarette and she shook her finger at him archly.

"Not here. People would talk!"

So that meant her sitting-room. There they grew confidential.

Eventually he earned his dinner.

CHAPTER XVII

THE tiny theatre was packed. The three ladies sat in front of the shabby box with its bare floor and wooden partitions papered in red on which some local wit had scrawled ribald remarks in white chalk.

Below them were crowded benches, mostly filled with women and girls, whilst the men strolled in the narrow gangway exchanging greetings, laughs and jokes, *Toscani* clipped between their lips at a jaunty angle, felt hats drawn forward over their dark faces and, here and there, a brigand-like cloak thrown across a stalwart shoulder.

It was a scene full of life, the healthy life of the people, dark in tone as a Vandyke picture with the black shawls of the women, but relieved at points by the uniform of a soldier, a blue and silver patch.

In the box facing them was a pair of officers in dark tunics, with magenta stripes running down the outer seam of the trousers.

"Those are gunners," Doran explained to Isoël, who was watching them. "Fine-looking fellows, aren't they? Especially the one on the left."

"Yes. He reminds me of an eagle."

"He wouldn't enjoy the compliment! It's the hated badge of Austria. Not so many years ago it was flaunting on the Piazza flags."

He peered down over her shoulder.

"Do you notice how few of the men are young? Although Bülow is working hard, I'm quite sure they're preparing for war, calling the men up secretly to join their units or hold themselves ready, beyond those now mobilized. This morning from the Public Gardens I saw a fine exhibition. Three hydroplanes practising. They came out from their base behind the Arsenal, great birds of war, dazzling in the bright sunshine. It struck a curious, martial note among the sleepy sailing barges."

"It would. I should have liked to see them."

"Come to-morrow on the chance? Ten o'clock. Is that too early? I'll be on the *riva* before the hotel."

"I'm afraid I can't. I've promised to go with Miss Dalgleish to a studio. But I could manage the morning after."

Mrs. Serocold turned her head.

"Francis?" Her voice was pettish. She disapproved of this shabby place and the arrangement of the chairs. For Judy sat stolidly between her and Isoël and although Phipps stood behind her she felt neglected by the host. "What time do they begin?"

"Oh, any time!" He was amused. "I warned you, Tory, so don't complain! Here's something to console you." He handed across a large box of chocolates which she accepted with an airy word of thanks.

She untied the ribbon and leaned back to take Phipps's eager advice as to her first choice. His cherubic face looked decidedly greedy. Judy was smoking happily, watching the different types below; the slender-limbed, handsome girls, their shawls thrown back, disclosing coral and gay beads round their olive throats, and their well-dressed glossy hair as they flirted with the gondoliers, glass-blowers and men from the market. There was more indulgence allowed to them here, she thought, than in the land of France.

Doran drew up his chair close behind Isoël's. Now he could talk in a lower voice that reached her despite the hubbub below of chatter and sonorous laughter.

"These are for you. I hope you like them?" He slipped another and prettier box with a sunny picture of the Molo on its cover into her lap. It was full of sugar-plums, pink and white, with almonds inside.

She thanked him, adding:

"They remind me of my childhood days years ago at Monaco."

"You lived there?"

"Most of the time. In a villa. My mother was delicate." Somehow the lie stuck in her throat, as the sweets before her caused the veil of the past to rise on her first party: the christening of a neighbour's baby in a squalid street of poor houses.

How her life had changed since then! And what was

to follow? Her heart beat faster. A fortnight more and Doran would leave.

"Shall I pass them on?"

"No. They're for you. I chose them because they made me think of Spring and sweetness—and Isoël—a trinity of excellence!" He laughed to cover the note of feeling underlying the pretty speech.

"You always think of me," she said.

He nodded his head. It was only too true.

"You're not a very forgettable person." His lips were close to her ear.

"I'm glad of that. I should hate to feel that our friendship ended when you left. Venice will seem strange without you. But, perhaps, some day we shall meet in London."

"I hope so." His face looked drawn.

A bell rang and the lights went down.

"Now!" She leaned back in her chair.

Doran's hand lay on the rail but he did not remove it. He wanted to feel, for a moment, the weight of that slender shoulder press against his scarred fingers. How dear she was, and young, and fragrant! He could see above the line of her collar the string of shells peeping forth with its emerald clasp encircled with pearls.

So she valued it? With an effort he turned his attention to the play, before him.

The scene upon the tiny stage showed to the right a *trattoria,* with walls distempered a pale ochre, and a pergola before the entrance covered with vine leaves from which hung bunches of little green grapes. Beneath this was a rough table, flanked by a pair of benches, and ornamented with a flask of Chianti and some coarse glasses.

Towards this retreat, sacred to Bacchus, down the straight dusty road came the quaint figure of a puppet, tripping on the tips of its toes and turning its head from side to side until it reached the green arbour where it sat down jerkily and drew off its broad-brimmed hat.

"Oh!" Isoël danced in her chair. "Do look! He's mopping his brow!"

"So he is. How clever! It's all worked by wires, you know. You can just see them through the glasses."

He paused as a shrill, strident voice from behind the flies called: "Tommaso!" With the word the puppet's mouth opened, then snapped together again. A ripple of laughter rose from the house.

The painted face turned slowly and stared at the audience in disgust. Then the owner banged the table.

A waiter, taking little hops, skipped up, napkin on arm and the hidden voice supplied the orders, whereupon the figure retired. From the other corner of the stage a wooden dog, painted ginger, came hobbling along, sat down, raised a hind leg thoughtfully and indulged in a hearty scratch.

Whistles arose in the gallery. The dog stood up, and turned its back to the house as though resenting such conduct. Its stumpy tail began to wag and its ears flick up and down. This provoked more mirth from the audience, with ribald remarks.

The waiter returned bearing a dish heaped up with macaroni; the old peasant fell upon it, cleverly twisting the long strings on to his fork, then threw back his head, clicked open his painted jaws and the macaroni disappeared.

"Well, I never!" Judy stared and laughed until the box re-echoed. "I'll bet you, two to one," she cried, "he'll pour down that Chianti."

But here a fresh actor appeared.

With a "clipperty-clop" a wooden horse came cantering down the road, a jaunty figure on its back in doublet and hose, with a feathered cap. It drew up at the inn, dismounted, hitched up the reins on a nail and tripped forward ferociously; a dare-devil fellow with sweeping moustache and enormous eyes, black as sloes.

"That's the hero of the piece," Doran whispered. "Now, where's the lady?"

"She's at the window above. Look!" Isoël was quite excited.

For a green shutter had opened wide and a little head in a red wig, with a peacock's feather perched on it, was thrust out coquettishly.

"Isn't she fetching?" Doran laughed. "A Venetian beauty, after Titian! Look at him standing up on tip-

toe and blowing kisses in the air. The horse is gazing up too. Lord! — it's been too much for it!" For that animal had sunk back with a rattle on its haunches.

Judy turned, with a radiant face.

"Ripping! How big are they?"

"About three feet, all told. Hush! Here's the love duet."

Two voices, a girl's and a man's, with a vast amount of tremolo, had started somewhere behind the scenes to the tinkle of a worn piano.

The comedy moved on apace. Out came an angry husband, rapier in hand to punish the lover. A duel ensued, extremely clever as the toy swords thrust and parried up to the final tragedy.

The stout elderly puppet lay prone in the dust, mourned by the dog, who lifted his muzzle in the air and showed marked signs of grief.

"Exit the husband!" Tory tittered. "I don't think it's quite proper! You didn't warn me of *this,* Francis." She laughed at him behind Judy's back.

"Poor Felix!" he said softly. Tory shook her finger at him. "But happy Reginald," he added. He saw her face change at the name. "Or Dick — or Cossie." His voice was dreamy.

Mrs. Serocold disdained any response to this mean attack. Phipps looked much amused.

"Add Stacy," whispered Doran in Isoël's ear, "and subtract Arthur. What's the result?"

"Francis!" She mocked. "Shall I bet you a pair of *grey suède gloves?*"

She had turned slightly in saying this and she saw that her shot had hit the mark.

"Ah, I had you there!" she laughed.

"Never mind. I'll pay you out. Look, they're off! It's an elopement."

For the heroine had flown downstairs, embraced her lover and mounted the steed with his assistance after some by-play, and now Lothario was behind her and they galloped off amidst frantic applause.

This ended the first scene.

The lights went up and the audience began to move about again, the men clapping on their hats removed in

deference to the actors. Little groups gathered round stalls on either side of the house where *limonata* and water ices were sold with sweet cakes of *polenta*. A smell of orange peel arose.

Mrs. Serocold gave a sniff disdainfully, and pushed back her chair. The others rose and drew to the back of the box where Doran opened the door to let in some fresh air.

"*Permesso?*" He drew out his cigarettes with a mischievious glance at Miss Dalgleish and handed the case round.

"Yes, on one condition," she laughed. "You've got to come to a dance with me, Friday evening. Are you on?"

"I don't know. Where is it?"

"In a studio. Quite a small affair, but I ran across an old friend at Christabel's the other day. Van Degan. He's an American and belongs to the artist colony here. You'll like him. He's a sport. I happened to mention your name to him and it turns out that he knew your father, admired his work tremendously. So he begged me to bring you along. Christabel Price and her aunt are going, and Miss Dark." She smiled slightly. "So you'll have two pretty girls to dance with."

"I'm not at all sure I *can* dance. I mean, with this idiotic cough."

"Never mind. You can sit out and get us supper all round. Oh, it's fancy dress! I forgot."

Doran frowned and seized the excuse.

"I think that settles it," he said. "Thanks, very much, all the same."

But Judy thrust the objection aside.

"Then come disguised as a British waiter? Van Degan will quite understand and he's very keen on meeting you."

Doran was thinking rather fast. To steal one dance with Isoël: the joy and pain of holding her in his arms for a fleeting minute. Dared he risk it? Had he the strength afterwards to say farewell?

"Do come." She put in her oar.

Mrs. Serocold watched the pair. She felt rather out of it, for Judy had made it very plain that the invitation

came from Van Degan and that Tory and Phipps were not included.

"What are you going as?" she asked.

"Ah, that's our secret." Isoël dimpled.

"You'd make a *charming* Vivandière!" Mrs. Serocold suggested.

"Wouldn't she?" said Doran, smiling. "In that case I should *have* to go!" He made up his mind suddenly, annoyed by Tory's innuendo. "If you're sure that our host won't object to my coming in ordinary evening dress and my disabilities as a dancer, you can count on me as a chaperon — or a wallflower, whichever you please!"

Judy laughed.

"All the better! It'll give *me* a better chance."

Doran looked at her, perplexed. Then he grinned.

"Good old Judy! I can guess. What a rag! Swear you won't trespass on my preserves?"

"Shan't I! You wait. Did you think I was going in a ball dress?"

"A ballet-dress, more likely."

Judy chuckled.

"As a fairy!"

Mrs. Serocold looked at Phipps and then shrugged her plump shoulders. She moved to the front of the box and sat down determinedly in the centre seat. The young man followed.

"I gather that Miss Dalgleish is to wear doublet and hose," he ventured.

"It's not very nice," said Tory softly. Their eyes met and Phipps nodded. "I hope she won't make our friend jealous." There was venom underlying the speech. "These Suffragettes!" She gave a laugh, shrill but subdued, as she watched his face.

"And what are *we* to do on Friday?" Phipps suggested playfully. He mistrusted the trend of the conversation.

"You'd better come and dine with me. I think I shall be off on Sunday. There's nothing whatever to do here and I want to put in a week in Paris."

"You couldn't make it Saturday? The journey I mean, not the dinner. I should love to come to that. I've got my marching orders too."

"No, really? Well, we'll see." She touched her lips, enjoining silence as the others rejoined them. It might be rather fun, she thought, to travel with him as an escort. She glanced up at Miss Dalgleish. "I've taken your seat. It's only fair you should have the corner one this time. And I want to talk to Miss Dark, about —"

She stopped, rather suddenly, as her eyes fell upon the girl. She had removed her light coat and stood now in blouse and skirt. It was the former that riveted Tory Serocold's attention. For the exact fellow to it lay on the top of her own trunk; a rather unusual *crêpe de Chine* model purchased by her at Clotilde's.

There were the same original sleeves with the narrow piping at the shoulders and long tight cuffs tapering into frilled points over the hands.

Even the colour had been copied, a pearly pink relieved at the throat by a broad band of black velvet, that sombre touch beloved by the French.

Yet Clotilde had sworn it was a model direct from Doucet and had charged a price which upheld definitely the statement that it was unique.

Could this apparently poor young person who stayed at a *pension* known to be cheap afford to dress at the great *couturière's?*

Impossible! Under her lashes, delicately darkened, the lady stared and stared and marvelled.

And then, in the midst of her annoyance, Judy supplied the missing link. For she called Isoël's attention to some one in the crowd below, and used the girl's Christian name, clearly and imperiously.

Across Tory, like a flash, came the memory of Clotilde's voice, terminating the conversation which threatened to upset a client: "*Isoël!* That will do. You're wanted in the fitting-room!"

Isoël — the *mannequin!*

She choked down her scornful laughter. No wonder the face had been familiar. A shop-girl in this company!

But how did she get there? Did Doran know? And Judith Dalgleish? Here she sniffed. A woman like that — so plainly eccentric! No doubt she had dreams

of "raising" the masses, or was taken in by a pretty face. But Francis? Another matter.

She recalled now his conversation at dinner concerning Rosalie. That, of course, was a blind! This was the girl he was after. Or was he, in truth, ignorant?

His voice cut across her thoughts:

"Hope you're not bored, Tory?" He had resumed his old seat and was bending forward in the gap.

"Not at all. Most interested." Her tone was a trifle tart.

"I musn't neglect her," thought Doran and he started to make conversation until the curtain drew up again, when he drew a silent sigh of relief, fixing his eyes on the stage.

In a little bower of twisted reeds the lovers lay close together, the absurd red wig on the villain's shoulder, the horse cropping by the entrance. A full moon shone down on them and on the marsh that fringed their shelter, where reeds and bushes of tamarisk bordered a pool of shallow water. From this came a croaking chorus, "Koax! Koax!" and stealthy movements.

Apparently the fugitives were snatching an hour of repose midway in their headlong flight.

They looked so stiff and ridiculous, hands clasped, their stubby toes sticking out of the wiry grass at the entrance, that Isoël laughed outright.

"Aren't they funny?" Doran agreed. "What a travesty of love! But just look at the audience. There's not a smile anywhere. They take *l'amore* more seriously in this sunny land than we do."

"*You*, you mean! I'm half of the South. Only my British side is ribald. And that red wig fascinates me, to say nothing of his moustache! But what's this?" She leaned forward.

For out crept, two by two, little figures from the rushes, clad in emerald-green tights, goggle-eyed and wide mouthed with spindle shanks and webbed feet. Frogs! A shining host of frogs.

Music sounded, faint and muffled. Lifting their limbs in unison, linking their quaint mottled arms, they began to hop through the dance, and paused at the end of the first bars, jaws wide open:

"Koax! Koax!"

"The Grand Ballet," Doran explained. "Don't they do it rippingly?"

For the frogs were off to a livelier measure and now, from the middle of the pond, rose with a jerk the *première danseuse,* in ballet skirts, and long pink legs like a coquettish baby ostrich. She tripped to the centre of the stage and began to rotate on the tips of her toes, arms above her flaxen wig, wreathed about with red roses.

A shout of delight came from the stalls, for the wooden figure had sunk back over the arms of a stalwart frog, a pink leg high in the air, her blonde curls sweeping the boards. There followed a spirited *pas de deux* whilst the rest of the ballet posed round them, uttering their shrill croak and clapping their little claw-like hands. Gradually the stage darkened and now the eyes of all the dancers began to glow, like tiny lamps, with some phosphorescent paint; the leading lady vanished from sight and the minor performers began to retreat on a slower measure, until, at length, nothing was visible but the reeds, dotted with rigid points of light.

Then with a last: "Koax! Koax!" these went out and the moon rose on a deserted strip of marsh; the lovers awoke from their sleep and sat up rubbing their eyes.

Even Mrs. Serocold joined in the hushed applause that followed this *coup.* For the sense of a dream had been achieved as skilfully as though the dancers had been in truth of flesh and blood. Here was an art that had reached its climax through centuries of loving toil.

"It's wonderful." Isoël sighed.

"Artists — to their finger-tips!" Doran was enthusiastic. "Ages ago, I believe, the puppet shows were run by the monks for miracle plays, to teach the people. The original Punch and Judy show is supposed to come from one of these; a mystery play: '*Pontius cum Judaeis*' — Pontius Pilate and the Jews. Hence the name, somewhat perverted. I suppose they gave Pilate a hump with the Roman's horror of any deformity."

"Really?" Isoël drank it in. "But it doesn't explain what puzzles me — how they work all those figures at once?"

"No, that's an actual science. I went behind the scenes one night with my father when I was a boy. It was enough to make one dizzy, all those scores of fine wires. They watch the result by means of mirrors but I really believe they could do it blindfold. It's in their blood; they're born to it, like the glass artists at Murano."

He paused, as a heavy stamping of feet announced the fall of the curtain.

Isoël did not join in, though the others clapped heartily. Her thoughts had gone back to that miracle-play in the early days of the church.

"Tired?" Doran's voice was tender.

"No! I could stay here forever."

"So could I." The words slipped out.

"But what about the war?" she asked.

"Ah, I'd forgotten that!" The cloud settled down again over his keen and powerful face.

If it were only the war, he thought, there might remain a thread of hope. He felt recklessly inclined to banish his doubts, forget to-morrow — above all, yesterday! — and satisfy his hungry heart.

Her next words strengthened the longing.

"I shall hate to think of you out there."

"Shall you?" His voice was hoarse.

"You know I shall," she answered simply.

"You'll write to me?"

She nodded her head. She was acting a studied part no longer, for something of the terror of war had moved her vivid imagination.

"I'll do more for you than that!"

"What?" He was gripping the back of her chair with sudden force at her strange words.

"Make munitions for you," she whispered.

"You *dear!*" He choked on the loving word.

Isoël, for the moment, meant it. She was fired by the notion of active help.

She could not unconsciously have used a better means of winning him. For he knew the terrible needs of the hour and the fine part that the women at home were playing in the giant struggle.

"I'll never doubt her again," he thought. "This settles it. I'll marry her."

The cool voice of his other neighbour fell on his ardour like a shower bath.

"You're not to monopolize Miss Dark! I haven't had a word with her."

He stood up and squared his shoulders.

"Sorry, Tory. My fault! We were deep in a question of the war. Miss Dark, when she gets back to London is going to make shells for us."

He spoke at random to hide his feelings.

"Sea shells?" asked Tory lightly. She pointed to the green necklace.

Her careless laugh jarred on him.

"No, not those butterfly things. Real work; work that lasts."

"But they don't last!" Tory pouted. "They go off with a bang! I know of course that work's the fashion. Women at home are mad about it. When they're not clever enough to nurse or to sing to the wounded soldiers, or even to sew on their own buttons, they all become skilled mechanics. It won't last!" She laughed again. "Although the pay is a compensation!"

She was studying the famous blouse. Of course the girl had copied hers. The buttons, she noticed, were different.

Isoël caught her roving glance.

"You must forgive my staring at you," said Tory very sweetly. "But I never saw such a divvy blouse! Surely it must be one of Clotilde's." Her hazel eyes were malicious.

Doran felt his nerves tighten. What did she mean? Had she guessed — or known this all along?

Then he heard Isoël's voice with her foreign accent very pronounced.

"No. I made zis one myself." As ever in her moods of excitement she lisped over the "th."

"How clever of you," Mrs. Serocold purred. "You must have had lessons in dressmaking?"

"I'm afraid it hardly warrants that." After the first deadly shock, all her courage had risen to meet it. She turned a perfectly calm face on Mrs. Serocold and asked placidly: "Who is Clotilde?"

Doran felt a sudden revulsion of feeling that left him shaken and sick.

In vain he tried to excuse this evasion by the girl's natural instinct to hide her poverty from a woman like Tory. But it roused all his old speculations. Why was she so ashamed of her work?

He waited, rigid, for Tory's reply.

"Oh, don't you know?" said that lady. "She's a very famous dressmaker. I go to her for all my frocks. She has the reputation, too, of having the prettiest *mannequins* of any house in the West End. But we mustn't let Mr. Doran hear us!"

"I think she would be too expensive for me." Isoël's lips were rather white but her dark eyes flashed as she added, "I've a horror of getting into debt."

For with the instinct of self-preservation she used the first weapon to hand, remembering the big ledger and "Monsieur" conselling further credit.

Tory started and glanced at Doran. He couldn't have told her? Impossible. The man's face was like a mask; he did not seem to be listening.

But she changed her tactics, scenting trouble. "Well, if you like pretty things, will you come and see some of mine? I bought a few on my way through Paris. *Do* come! At four, to-morrow?"

For a moment the girl hesitated, shrinking from the *tête-à-tête*. Then she saw it was wiser to go and know at least what lay before her.

"Thank you, I will. It's very kind."

"You don't ask *me*," said Doran lightly. But he knew he had made a foolish mistake in his sudden impulse of protection.

Tory gave her shrill laugh.

"My *dear* Francis! To see frillies? It's very bad for the young idea. You'll be going to Clotilde's yourself next!"

"Too costly an amusement." His smile was a shade sardonic.

Tory resented the subtle thrust and raised malicious eyes to his.

"It might be. In the end! With all those attractive young ladies." Then she turned to the smiling Phipps. "Now, you, I know, are a wise young man. And always 'look before you leap.'"

He was delighted by her praise.

"I look, and long — but my courage fails me!"

Judy gave a little grunt.

"And live to fight another day!" she remarked to the world at large.

Isoël stared straight ahead. Disaster had come, swift and sure. Was there no way out of it?

There *must* be! She would fight to the last. Doran left her to her thoughts.

CHAPTER XVIII

NEVER was morning so divine, sky so blue nor the lure of Venice so openly provocative as on the day of all days that breathed for Isoël the end.

The end of sunshine and sweet laughter, of dreams that stood tiptoe to reach a golden reality; the end of Love on his faery threshold, stretching out his arms to her.

All night long she had tossed and wondered, asking herself desperately how she could evade the truth, building up a screen of lies. But there were great rents in it that could not be drawn together. Mrs. Serocold held the facts. What use to prolong the struggle? This woman she hated had but to write a single line to Clotilde and ask for Isoël's antecedents to learn everything, even to her connection with Lady Manister.

Why had she not changed her name? Here by an odd twist of pride she found herself hotly indignant. Deny her parentage? *Mille fois, non!* She owed to her father the first start in her triumphant social progress. He had brought her the Braces' patronage and the open comradeship of Judy.

Her cheeks flushed as she foresaw the gossip in the *pension;* Phipps passing the news round, the laughter of the Percivals. It would be impossible to stay there. But where could she go? And what was the use of lingering in this enchanted land since Doran was lost to her forever.

Could she, dare she, admit the truth? That she had been a *mannequin,* driven to it by reduced means after the death of her parents, and so stop further inquiries?

Then she remembered it was too late! She had flatly denied all knowledge of Clotilde and that luxurious establishment where Mrs. Serocold bought her gowns.

"Who is Clotilde?" The damning speech returned to her as she strode along trying to calm her rebellious nerves with the help of exercise. For Doran had heard her. She knew that. She had meant him to. In her despera-

tion she had realized that her enemy would hardly resort to open speech before the rest of the company. That was not Society's way — her fine nostrils curled with scorn above the bitter young mouth — it preferred to strike in the dark and let scandal do the rest.

She ought not to have gone to that play, knowing that Mrs. Serocold would be included in the party, but her earlier lack of recognition had lulled the girl into false safety.

Well, it was no use looking back! What remained out of the *débâcle?*

Sir Abel Groot? Suddenly she shivered in the bright sunshine. The coarse nature of the man under his veneer of wealth seemed more apparent now after mixing with better people. A vision of Doran rose up, clear-eyed and well bred, clean in his honour and unsoiled by the underground methods of finance. Then that ferrety insolent face with the eyes of stale experience. No, there must be an end of that; she stood to risk worse evils.

Could she, dare she, admit the truth? That she had reached the lowest stage of despair, though it needed but a trifle to swing the pendulum back again. She had decided in the night that, in the event of Mrs. Serocold's threatening her with instant exposure, she would go herself direct to Doran and see that her story reached him first.

At least — the old habit was strong — a part of it, tinged with romance. No need to open out the life with Lady Manister and before.

He *might* treat it as a joke? You never knew! Men were strange. Not so conventional as women where their affections were involved. In any case he could resent Tory's mischievous intervention and that would be a point scored.

She began to plan the interview.

If Doran really, truly loved her, there was just a chance. She clung to this fugitive fragment of hope. She would never let him regret his choice; she would be his slave, wax in his hands. It did not occur to her that this conduct was hardly the means of holding a husband, that a life without a shadow of conflict palls on the most devoted of men!

Yes, she would faithfully keep her vow. As she left the Merceria behind her and emerged from under the Clock Tower, she decided to visit again the shrine sacred to St. Isidore. But midway to St. Mark's she swerved to the left, aware that Phipps was approaching from the Piazzetta, strolling along with a roving eye. She was not in the mood for his vapid chatter. He would flirt with her now but later on he would be the first to join the crowd that openly mocked the *mannequin!*

She pulled up in front of Cook's. It reminded her of the letter from Anna. The clerk who had cashed her letter of credit handed it over without delay. But she did not open it at once. Retracing her steps, she passed the well where the pigeons were having their morning bath and entered the church by the side door with its Gothic arch and wealth of sculpture. Here all was peace and silence, save for the echo of shuffling feet and the thin dirge-like voice of a guide holding forth in the transept.

It roused another memory; that first heavenly day of promise, with the golden horses pawing the air, the rush of wings above her head, and far away, a man's figure, head bent over a book.

Something tugged at her heart. He was dearer to her than she had guessed, this tall broad-shouldered Englishman who had risked not only his life but his health fighting for her at the Front.

Yes, for her! And for all women. To save them from those unspeakable acts of lust and cruelty that the Huns would bear forever stamped on their shield, and to save his country from going down under the heel of barbarians.

She felt a sudden pride in him, more personal than ever before, as she moved on with her light step until she came to the tiny chapel.

It was empty save for an old woman, placing fresh candles on the stand. Isoël bought the tallest one left in the scanty store. For yesterday had been a *festa* and the devout numerous. She watched the wick splutter up, then soar into a pale flame, and her prayer went with it as she knelt, half-hidden in the shadows.

Like him of old she begged for a sign. But out of the dim vault above came no angel with a flaming torch and

no "still, small voice." Only the faint creak, creak of the woman's shoes as she shuffled out with that peculiar dragging step which seems to prevail in religious service.

"Mary — Mother, deign to listen!" Isoël's shining head was bent, her slim hands folded tight. "Listen to my humble prayer."

Outside in the sunshine, the pigeons fluttered round the window, little pink feet making a splash like blossom on the snowy marble; wings rustling, eager-eyed, radiant with the joy of life.

Within was the vast hollow space and the dust of the great apostle, with the hovering shadow of death and the faint lingering smell of incense.

Isoël's head sank lower.

"Pardon my sins and show me a way. Oh, Blessed Mother, *give him me!* I will be true and faithful and good, a wife after thy holy pattern, if Thou wilt grant my request. He loves me . . . and —" She felt the blood pounding against her startled heart, and the knowledge poured in on her. Her trembling hands fell from her face, her eyes widened. It had come! She knew, at last, that she loved Doran.

Now — now of all moments! When she stood on the brink of an endless parting. Why, it was losing the light of the world; to go down into utter darkness.

She raised her sombre eyes to the altar where St. Isidore, painfully, was being dragged to his martyrdom between the little bronze lions.

And suddenly rebellion seized her; her youth, crushed by a fugitive sorrow, rose aggressive in her heart, resenting the tragedies of religion.

No help had been given to the martyr. There *was* no help! It was all in vain. For if the saints could not count upon heavenly intervention what would be the fate of sinners? There was poor St. Isidore — she was vague about his history — but undoubtedly a holy man. Why this cruel punishment? She rose to her feet in the sudden reaction from faith to a youthful scepticism. It was as though the scales had fallen from her eyes and she saw the brutal facts.

With the movement a letter slipped from the folds of her coat where she had placed it when she knelt down

to pray. It made a white patch on the pavement and she stopped quickly to pick it up.

Anna? Clotilde? Was there by chance help here, from a worldly source? What if the house had failed in her absence, "Monsieur" interned with other Germans? How this would clear her path! The wild fancy gathered strength as she moved out of the dark corner tearing open the envelope and looking round for a better light.

Behind her the candle burnt on, the wax troubled by the draught, guttering down upon its spike. Its little hour of devotion had outlived that of the girl's. For love in its first vivid flash had dimmed all else ruthlessly, and the pale flame of a mystic religion that she built on the sands of symbolism could not survive the sudden clear, heady gust of youthful passion.

Life claimed her, not the death of desire that the priesthood preached; though in God's good time she would return to a deeper faith, a surer knowledge.

Now, with nerves still quivering, head thrown back defiantly, she was drinking in Anna's news, seeking for inspiration.

It centred round Rosalie who had departed in disgrace. "Madame" had caught "Monsieur" out, cleverly, red-handed. Such a scene as there had been! Monsieur was now very meek and Clotilde "top-dog"! Anna was glad that the girl was gone — "Very unpleasant, the whole affair" — yet sorry for her in a "sort of way." "Monsieur" was just the kind of man to "get a girl into trouble and leave her to find her way out." Now of course they were short-handed and although they had advertised freely no one suitable appeared. So many trades were open to girls with a higher remuneration. Anna declared that she knew "for a fact" that Clotilde "missed" Isoël, and would take her back any day. She advised her to ask for better terms.

"Do think it over, dear," [she wrote in her pretty hand]. "It would be just like old times and Delphine suggested my letting you know as we like to keep the place *select* and you were always a credit to it. Better strike while the iron's hot! Madame's in a good temper. She's just been paid a big account which she'd put down as a bad debt. I expect you remember the fair lady? Very smart. She ordered a dress from your putty model in the

Winter. Mrs. Serocold's the name. The cheque came from Venice too! A funny thing, as you're there. Perhaps you lent her the money!!!!!!!"

Isoël paused, but she did not smile. Her fine eyebrows came together.

"Venice?" And then, "lent her the money"? Was this why Tory had glanced at Doran when Phipps was babbling about his debts? The thought was a revelation.

She had got the money out of him!

The girl's face grew white with anger. She was sure of it. Those long *suède* gloves forgotten in his sitting-room? She had dined then, with him *alone?* One doesn't transact that sort of business with other people looking on!

Isoël stamped her pretty foot, stung by a dart of jealousy, which oddly enough recoiled from the man but cried for vengeance on the woman.

"And now she'd like to ruin me."

She turned instinctively to the door out of the chill of that sacred place and paused in the portico to scan the Piazza before she emerged.

"I'm going to have a gondola and think this out," she decided. Unfurling her green parasol she screened her excited face with it, mindful of Phipps's proximity and hurried down towards the columns.

Once out on the dazzling water she leaned back and gave herself up to a clear review of the position, recalling every tiny scrap of conversation concerning the lady.

Felix? That must be the husband. She remembered Doran's little joke. How would "Felix" appreciate the fact of his wife's bills being paid by another man? Her lips curled.

Ah! She held the key-stone now to her perilous castle in the air.

"I've got you, milady!" She hugged herself. "If you ruin me, I can ruin you. But I think the threat will be sufficient." Her face, warmed by a glow of malice, was so vivid that a man turned for another long look at her as their gondolas met and drifted asunder.

Isoël froze him with a glance. The man, who was on his honeymoon, told his wife that it was an actress.

"Seen her somewhere, on a postcard."

"I *thought* she was painted," said the bride. "And, of course, that *hair* — !"

He squeezed her hand. A little bored by propinquity that left him no leisure to himself, he was now comforted by the thought that his new possession showed tact.

"Not *my* style," he said with a laugh.

Isoël, unaware of the interest she had evoked, drifted down the Grand Canal, planning out the coming battle.

Meanwhile Doran was striding along the empty shore of the Lido far from the gay crowd of tourists, a party of whom, recklessly, was indulging in a first bathe, tempted by the sunshine above which had warmed the surface of the water.

He had no doubt in his own mind that Tory was possessed of the truth. He had been a fool to bring them together and precipitate this exposure.

But why, oh why, had the girl lied? What secret lay behind the story of her life at Clotilde's? His heart was sore.

He pictured the meeting this afternoon and shrank from the ordeal before her.

Tory could be very cruel. She would play with her prey like a cat with a mouse.

He swished off the head of a tall thistle that grew on the edge of the sandy ridge with his walking-stick viciously. He had not forgotten his own dismissal years ago, though kindly Time — and the fact that his passion for her was dead — had induced a careless indifference. Now his tolerant affection was changed to a feeling of enmity.

How could he foil her odious purpose? Should he go straightway to her and admit that he knew all the facts of the case?

But then she might use it to wound the girl still more subtly. Doran cursed!

He could well imagine Tory's smile, her pert nose in the air, as she pointed out to Isoël that he had been only amusing himself, considered a *mannequin* fair sport.

No, he had better hold his tongue and wait results. If only the girl would come to him in her trouble and give

him her confidence in full, instead of screening herself behind this endless prevarication.

He hated lies. They filled him with the utter contempt of a strong man who, with all his faults, rates honour at its true worth and deems deceit the last resort of the coward. Brave she was in so many ways, why could she not be brave in the truth?

And a wife who evaded a straight question and was wrapped round with mystery? It was too horrible to imagine.

"There's only one course for you, old man," he told himself as he strode along. "And that's to get back to work again and put the girl out of your head."

But his reason could not altogether still the pleading of his heart.

Supposing Isoël came to him, her hand forced by the enemy, and that he found that her old life hid nothing more serious than poverty; that her statement concerning her dead father was based on fact, and that her conduct throughout had been guided by false pride, how then should he act?

He stopped dead and stared at the sea.

For a point remained, unsatisfied. If she were so poor as this implied and forced to earn her own living by exploiting that beautiful figure of hers — Doran winced at the thought — how came it that she could afford the long visit to Italy?

The fare alone was no trifle and she did not seem pressed for money.

Who paid?

Doran's mouth set in a hard cynical line.

"I give it up!"

Straining his eyes he saw on the far horizon three grey slits in the sky; so it looked at the first glance. It was a line of battle-ships.

War! Thank God there was always the war.

He sat down on the sandy bank and watched their apparently slow progress; for the distance was very great, wondering whither they were bound.

Italy was coming in; there were signs in the sky for those who read. Italy, with her straight-limbed men, wiry and agile, already hardened by the long campaign in Tri-

poli. Above all with her mighty heart, throbbing with the old note: hatred of the Austrian.

The great Garibaldi celebration was to be at Quarto in a fortnight and the King was going in full state. D'Annunzio, the poet-patriot, was to read an ode on Liberty. What a moment it would be to strike for a Greater Italy, the stolen provinces restored, a firmer grip on the Adriatic!

Doran prayed that it might happen. He loved the land of his birth, which has had a peculiar fascination for all great Englishmen in the past. For in Italy, as once in Greece, a spirit of freedom untainted by the commercialism of modern life persists and is kept pure and strong in the hearts of its poorest peasantry.

The soldier's mind went slowly back through the events of the past year. He saw Belgium blotted out, Serbia and Montenegro, the Armenian race crucified, war stripped of its code of honour, and lust rampant on the earth. Saw, too, the great neutrals still blind to the real issue, even the greatest whose harbour bore the mighty statue of Liberty. But the day would come, he was convinced, when Germany with her megalomania would overreach herself and dare to infringe the rights of the lookers-on. Then, with war at her very gates, the New World would awake to a clarity of spiritual vision, aware at last that the vast struggle of Britain and her great Allies was no selfish battle for gain, but a fight for the freedom of mankind against an iron tyranny.

For he held the faith that all Christian races met in agreement on one point: the abolition of slavery. And this was what Prussianism aimed at with her supermen and superweapons: to place the whole world in fetters and enforce the doctrine that "might is right."

Doran's thoughts came back to England, awake at last, though none too soon. In his morning's paper he had read the Premier's speech at Newcastle, and how, with a soothing note he denied the lack of munitions at the Front, but called upon the people at home for further and better efforts.

The soldier smiled bitterly.

This smoothing down of drastic facts did not appeal to the man who had watched that worst of all modern de-

feats; an army shedding its gallant blood in a resistance rendered futile by the hourly hunger of its guns.

The grey ships of war vanished and a pleasure steamer came churning along, leaving a comet-like tail of foam. Boats with red and yellow sails dipped in its swell like butterflies fluttering on to an azure flower, while gondolas, those moths of the night, with silver antennæ, felt their way between the children of the sunshine.

But Doran gazed with blind eyes. He was back in the din and smoke of battle, smothered in mud, wet to the bone, parched, aching, yet oddly content. He dreamed on, his eyes half-closed whilst the sun beat down upon his shoulders, penetrating his flannel suit and slowly blistering his hands.

A mosquito settled on his wrist and he brushed it off impatiently. Then as his eyes fell on the scars he gave a sudden joyous laugh. He would bear those to the day of his death.

War had prevailed over love.

CHAPTER XIX

ISOËL was shown up into an empty sitting-room.

It faced on a side canal, but a ray of sunshine drifted in obliquely and lit up the writing-table with Tory's pale mauve paper, stamped with a dainty monogram, and the lizard-skin attaché-case with its gilded lock and tiny key.

A pair of soft rose-coloured cushions warmed the faded hotel sofa and the mantelpiece was gay with flowers and a number of unframed photographs. For Mrs. Serocold travelled in comfort and carried sufficient knick-knacks about to invest the rooms in which she stayed with her own home atmosphere.

Some French illustrated papers — of the class that prefers beauty unadorned — selected in Paris, together with a couple of crumpled yellow-backs, lay on the centre table beside a siphon and used glass and an ash-tray in the shape of a dolphin with an iridescent shell in its mouth. This was half full of cigarette ends.

Isoël noted the fact. Had Phipps been there that afternoon? Or Doran? The thought was disturbing. Then she remembered that the latter had mentioned to Judy that he was off next morning for a day at Padua. She drew a deep breath of relief.

A pair of long *suède* gloves had been tossed on the top of a blue sunshade near the incriminating tumbler. Cautiously Isoël stooped and examined the mark inside of the maker's name and her face cleared. Another link in her evidence. For her plans were carefully mapped out, down to the slightest detail. Yet success hung upon a thread, on the truth of her wild surmise.

Had Doran lent the money?

She moved across to the mantelpiece and studied the various photographs. They were of men, with one exception: a pretty girl in a court gown which seemed all train and bouquet, and dwarfed her height despite her head-dress. The picture was signed: "To Tory, from Babs."

Beside it a bright boy's face laughed at the world, his trim figure, closely knit, in khaki. "Arthur" was scrawled across the corner.

Next came a square-headed man, with a square chin and such square shoulders that they stood out in little shelves above his arms and swelling chest. He had an expression which seemed to say: "I've arrived. English papers, note!"

To make the fact still more potent he had written with a fine flourish: "Cordially, Reginald P. Sprottheimer."

"A German screening himself behind the stars and stripes," thought Isoël. "I expect he's paying his footing in England and the fair lady finds him useful."

Overlapping this prosperous person was a still larger sepia print of a languid young man in an oak chair, leaning his brow upon his hand.

This was: "Cossie" — "eternally" hers!

"Not the sort of individual I should care to meet in the hereafter," the girl decided; then moved back quickly as she heard Mrs. Serocold's voice raised in the adjoining room.

The door opened. In she swept, in a wonderful "rest-gown" of "nigger" brocade which showed an underskirt of lace in some sort of tinsel and wing-like sleeves; the effect not unlike a mandarin's coat, though cunningly clipped to her full figure.

Her plump arms were bare to the elbow, her little hands glittered with rings; her shoes of the same dull brocade were ornamented by paste buckles and about her was the proud air of a lady fresh from the hands of her maid and aware of her own dainty perfection.

"Ah, how-d'ye-do?"

She advanced, smiling, malice visible in her eyes, and they shook hands warily like a pair of boxers before a fight summing up each other's points.

Isoël looked cool and assured, a fact which annoyed her adversary; for this rather magnificent reception had roused the girl's sense of humour.

"And this is one of the pretty frocks?" she asked with a gay laugh. "I must have a good look at it."

To Mrs. Serocold's surprise she found herself in the

position of a *mannequin* before a client. Isoël was walking round her.

"How sweet of you to put it on." She had secured the first advantage and meant to use it cleverly to ruffle her adversary's temper. "The front's charming! I'm not sure I quite like the back so much. This pleat here—" she touched it lightly—"isn't it a shade too narrow? I mean for your hips. It widens them. But I'm sure Clorinda could alter it? Wasn't that your dressmaker's name?"

"No. Clotilde." The words came out with an ominous snap as the lady wheeled round controlling herself with an effort. "Won't you sit down, Miss Dark? There's something I want to say to you."

"Thanks." With a graceful movement the girl settled herself on the sofa, her slender feet lightly crossed in their immaculate buckled shoes. "But I hope you've not forgotten your promise to show me all your pretty frillies?"

"I've forgotten nothing." Tory stood with her back to the table, her chin tilted. "I've a better memory than you—apparently!" Her voice was acid.

Isoël laughed.

"I daresay. It's not one of my strongest points."

"For instance," Mrs. Serocold stroked down the soft folds of brocade and patted a little knot of flowers in the tinsel belt lovingly, "I should have thought this very gown would awaken certain memories?"

"Why?" Isoël's brows went up with a supercilious amusement. "Was it perhaps at some Exhibition? I seem to have heard of one lately. 'Clothes for War-time'—that was it!" She went on, rather quickly. "To tell you the truth, Mrs. Serocold, I'm not really fond of tea-gowns. I suppose I shall come to them, *in time*, but they're hardly suitable for a girl."

"I agree with you," said Tory tartly. "And in any case I'm quite sure they're most unsuitable for *you*."

She was furious at the clever way Isoël had compared their ages. She was only clever herself when she kept a firm hold on her captious temper. She suffered from the hysteria—so common before the war—induced by a subtle use of drugs and a never-ending search for excite-

ment. Between her days of feverish pleasure she had many an interval of prostration, when she lay in a darkened room, a nervous wreck, dissolved in tears.

She was threatened by an attack now and her restless, fluttering hands betrayed her. Isoël recognized the signs and, merciless, applied the goad.

"Still, you mustn't think I don't admire the one you've on," she said sweetly, ignoring the last remark. "I think it's perfectly lovely *for you*. The long lines add to your height and then lace is always softening. Just the thing to slip into when you feel, perhaps, not quite your best. I remember my mother used to say that a tea-gown was a matron's refuge."

Tory winced.

"Your mother from Nice?" There was no mistaking her meaning now. "You see I remember our conversation at Clotilde's — every word of it!"

"I think you're mistaken." Isoël's eyes met the angry hazel ones. "I've met your husband, I believe. But I'm quite sure you weren't with him. Besides I don't know Clotilde."

Tory's face was a study.

"Felix? It's impossible!"

"Is it?" Isoël laughed back. "But London's a very small place. One's always running across people — of all sorts, *bien entendu!* He's older than you, isn't he? Of course it's difficult to judge."

Tory had reached the end of her patience.

"Rubbish!" she said very rudely. "You've never met him. It's a lie."

"Really, Mrs. Serocold!" Isoël's proud head went up on the slim but rounded neck. "I must ask you to explain that."

"Certainly." The lady sneered. "He never runs about with shop-girls."

She looked to see her victim crushed, but to her fury and amazement the girl laughed. Clear and youthful her voice rang through the high room.

"You're *too* funny! Do explain. Of course I quite see the joke. Poor dear Mr. Serocold!"

This side thrust at her solemn partner, which was shrewder than Isoël even guessed, stung his wife beyond

endurance. She took a quick step forward, quivering with hysterical anger.

"Take care, Miss Dark! You may be clever in your way — it's the stock-in-trade of adventuresses — but you're playing a very dangerous game. I know who you are and the sort of life Clotilde's girls all lead and I'm not going to stand quietly by and see you impose on my friends."

"I think you're mad," said Isoël slowly. "But that can pass, for the moment. What do you propose to do?" She shrugged her shoulders as though in advance she minimized her enemy's power.

"Do? I shall go to Francis Doran and give him the facts of the case."

"He *will* be pleased." Isoël smiled. "He's the sort of man to revel in gossip!" Her irony was obvious. "I'd advise you instead to go to Phipps. He'd believe anything you say — on the chance of a dinner!" Her lips curled. "He's an economical young man. But as to Francis —" She paused on the name. "You might have cause to regret it."

"Should I!" Tory shrilled.

"Yes. It's never wise to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs."

Mrs. Serocold recoiled. She gave the girl a venomous look in which was the shadowy presence of fear, coughed, hunted in her bosom and produced an absurd little handkerchief embroidered with a dog's head.

She drew it quickly across her lips, thinking hard. Then she brazened it out.

"You talk in riddles! I shall do precisely what I said before. And also warn Miss Dalgleish."

"I'd like to hear you!" Isoël laughed. For she had seen Mrs. Serocold's start. "I'm sure she'd be very flattered by your kindly interest in her affairs. Don't you think that in both cases they're old enough to choose their friends?"

"Oh, as to your Miss Dalgleish," Tory's voice was very nasty, "I wouldn't give *that* for her morals! But with Francis it's another matter. Men are more easily taken in. And he'd listen to *me* —" She paused and added with the intention of wounding the girl, "I sup-

pose since you're so intimate he's told you that he and I were engaged some years before I married my husband? So our friendship stands on no new footing." She gave her shrill little laugh.

This was news to Isoël. She felt a sudden accession of anger with a sharp pang of jealousy, but she kept herself well in hand.

"That's rather unusual, isn't it? Cause and effect." Her voice shook with inward mirth as she added, "You must have a very *forgiving* nature."

The inference could not be ignored. Mrs. Serocold hastily, with a slight loss of dignity, explained that the match had been broken off by her parents through Doran's barren prospects.

"*Tiens!*" Isoël's eyes sparkled. "How you must have regretted it since! It seems hard to have thrown away love for money and then to discover that you might have captured both together. Perhaps it makes you a little bitter?" Her manner changed, menacing. "Still it's no excuse for insulting *me*."

Tory, who was a coward at heart, shrank back. Then she recovered her presence of mind.

"You deserve every word I've said!" She flounced down on the nearest chair, weary of her earlier pose and feeling the need of support. "You've no business to come here and hide what you are and set your cap at every decent man you meet. Yes, that's the truth and you know it!" She was getting hysterical again, wound up by her own words. "I shall write privately to Clotilde and ask her to tell me all she knows. Then I shall take the letter to Francis and that will end the whole matter."

"Oh, no, it won't," said Isoël boldly. "It will only be the beginning of trouble. For I shall go and see your husband and say that you take money from men."

Tory gasped.

"You daren't!" she cried. "And I'll never believe that Francis—" She stopped and tried to retrieve the damning slip. "It isn't true and you can't prove it!"

Isoël leaned forward. Her eyes, narrowed between her lids, shone like brown onyxes. The whole face was

Eastern now, in its passion and its cruelty. But she still smiled, with scornful lips.

"I can prove you dined with him alone, and spent the evening in his rooms. And that Clotilde's account was paid within three days of that event. And if your husband asks for your pass book or makes inquiries at the bank he will find a cheque big enough to convince him of the truth. A cheque *signed* and endorsed by yourself. No denial will cover this!"

It was a magnificent piece of bluff and she carried it through without a quiver. She was fighting for more than ambition, her fine wits sharpened by love.

"But it's blackmail!" Tory screamed.

"I am only using your own weapon."

An ominous silence fell between them.

The older woman shook in her shoes, aware of more than the younger guessed; the fraud practised on her husband and his jealousy of Francis Doran.

For the fact of that earlier engagement had always rankled in his mind. Erroneously he placed the man as the danger point in his wife's flirtations.

Her hands went up to the rope of pearls wound twice about her throat as though they were throttling her; colour came out on her face in patches. Yet she strove desperately for calm. This must be stopped at all hazards. What were Doran's love affairs in proportion to her own danger? Let the silly fellow go.

Thus her thoughts whirled on to the throb, throb, of her tight pulse. A drum was beating in her head. Another moment and she would scream.

But Isoël broke the strain.

"Don't you think, Mrs. Serocold, we might end this unpleasant scene? To begin with, the trouble is based upon an absurd mistake of yours. Some fancied resemblance between myself and a young person at Clotilde's." She said this with a lofty indifference. Then as Tory glanced up with a flicker of hope in her sullen anger, Isoël's voice grew stronger, with a "social" inflexion, extremely well done. "It's not very flattering to me, for although I'm not inclined to boast about my people at this juncture my father was in the English Navy and

came of a good old family. I'm poor and I'm not ashamed of it but from an actual point of birth I consider myself quite your equal. And I shouldn't like to play the part proposed unless you force me to it.

"I am even willing to admit that I, too, may be mistaken. Though *this* gave me food for thought." She drew out from her little bag a crumpled glove in pale grey *suède* and smoothed it pensively where it lay, still stained with sand, on her knee. "It's yours, isn't it?" she asked. Then with a mischievous friendliness, "You really shouldn't leave traces behind you!"

Tory was on the verge of collapse. She would have given her soul away for a good strong brandy and soda or one of those useful little tablets she was wont to allude to as "Saccharine."

"Where did you find it?" she asked unwisely. Then with a desperate touch of malice, "And what were you doing there yourself?"

"*Where?*" asked Isoël swiftly, and laughed.

She put her useful witness away and leaned easily back on the sofa. "Well — is it peace or war?"

Tory was rolling her handkerchief feverishly between her fingers and she paused for a moment to straighten out the corner where the dog's head, with its snub nose and bulgy eyes, added the latest chic effect.

Her absent solicitude brought a touch of burlesque into the play. Isoël began to shake with an inward mirth mixed with relief.

"Your Pekingese?" She choked on the word.

Tory looked up helplessly.

"Yes. 'Miko.'" Her eyes were strained. She collected her thoughts with an effort. "Well, Miss Dark, I've heard your story and — parts of it may be true." She stopped to moisten her parched lips. "I don't wish to be too hard or to get mixed up in this affair. It's most unpleasant and — and —" She hunted in vain for the missing word and wound up weakly, "and all that! If, as you say, you have nice people one naturally feels some reluctance in spreading gossip about a girl so young as yourself. Though, I think," she added, with a faint, flickering revival of spirit, "that you're able to protect yourself!"

"Quite," said Isoël very distinctly.

Mrs. Serocold's lips quivered. She went on rather hastily. "Your father, you say, is in the Navy, and of course *now*—" for the first time she blessed the war—"we are all of us more than grateful to our fleet. A sailor's daughter—" her voice ran down and stopped like a clock left unwound.

Isoël helped her out.

"So it's peace? I'm very glad to hear it. There's no need to explain further. So long as you yourself are convinced about—well, my double at *Clotilde's*,—and my good friends remain unchanged in their kindly attitude to myself I shall certainly not presume upon my slight acquaintance with your husband. That sums it up, I think."

"Y-es," Tory was forced to respond.

Isoël thought for a moment and then lifted her sombre eyes.

"There's one thing more I should like to say. Mr. Doran has never breathed a single word about that cheque—the one we've arranged to forget. I found it out by an accident."

Into Tory's blank face came a flicker of curiosity. Intrigue was the life of her soul and it acted now like a tonic. Isoël divined her thought.

"No," she said, "I didn't guess it. I held the proof in another way." She was thinking of Anna's helpful letter.

"Ah!" Mrs. Serocold started, almost joyously. "*Blotting-paper!*"

For a moment the girl stared at her, bewildered in turn, then she let fall a shocked:

"*Mon Dieu!*"

The next her laughter pealed forth. This was the limit. What a woman!

After a faint hesitation, Mrs. Serocold joined in.

"I'm cleverer than you think, you see!" She was pleased with her perspicacity. It restored in a measure her self-respect. Then her eyes clouded again. "I often wonder," she said vaguely, "if the old method wasn't the best. Sand, you know! I've a curio that belonged to a wicked old French marquise. Cossie brought it me from

Tours. It's in a little writing-set — *so* pretty —" Her voice faltered and she pressed a hand to her throbbing head.

Isoël felt suddenly sorry. The foe was not worthy of her steel. She stood up and pulled down her coat.

"I'm afraid you're tired," she said gravely.

At that ominous word which always brought to the lady's mind a subtle reflection on her appearance, she stirred herself.

"Oh, dear no," she spoke brightly. "Though I'm glad our little talk's over. I think we understand things better." But she rose to her feet uncertainly.

"I think so." Isoël nodded. She made a movement towards the door.

Mrs. Serocold held out her hand.

"You won't stay for a cup of tea?" She had resumed her society manner. "It's shockingly bad in this hotel, but still —" she gave her shrill laugh, "I included it in my invitation!"

"No, thanks." Isoël touched the other's fingers with her own. The contact gave her a faint repugnance despite the prickings of her conscience. But she played the part allotted her. "Not even to see your pretty frillies!"

Mrs. Serocold was gracious.

"I expect you've plenty of your own."

And with this the pair parted.

. . . . . .

All the way home, as the gondola rocked down the Grand Canal in the evening light, Isoël tasted to the full the bitter-sweet of a victory gained by means more foul than fair.

She tried to rally her drooping spirits.

"But I've *won!*" she cried to the sunset sky that flushed the angels of the Salute. "I'm safe again. I ought to be happy."

Between the white palaces and her inner vision a face rose up with dark brows and keen grey eyes that searched her soul to its inmost depths: the face of Doran, the man she loved, who believed in her — or so she thought.

"And why not?" she cried hotly, her dry hands clasped together, eyes bright with a touch of fever.

But she did not try to answer the question.

CHAPTER XX

DORAN arrived before the others at Van Degan's house on Friday night.

He took to his host from the first glance at his bony, nervous but clever face, with its Vandyke beard, turning grey, and steady eyes of a deep slate blue. He was dressed in a *Quattrocento* costume as "Il Moro" and the gold tunic suited the spare lines of his body, whilst the short coat of sable velvet with its opulent lining of purple silk added an air of dignity suggestive of the greatest "Sforza."

"I'm proud to meet you, Mr. Doran. I remember your father, years ago, and you bear a strong resemblance to him if you'll permit me to say so. A fine artist and a man typical of the best in your race—" He added, very courteously, "which is showing its worth in this war."

The generous tribute pleased Doran.

"Thank you! It's good of you to ask me. But I hope that Miss Dalgleish explained that I'm no use in the dancing line? I feel I'm here under false colours."

"She did." Van Degan nodded gravely. "It brought its own consolation. You're the very man I've been looking for to stand by me in this fray. I'm referring to the supper department. You get me?"

Doran laughed.

"I do. You can work me as hard as you like in that line, with elderly ladies claiming the chaperon's reward. But please don't introduce me to girls or they'll turn me down in disgust." He glanced round at the motley crowd in fancy dress which was shown off to advantage by the studio, a fine room with a polished floor.

"You've some wonderful costumes here to-night. May I ask what your own stands for?"

"I'm a noble Duke," Van Degan chuckled, "who came, I guess, to a bad end. One, Ludovico Sforza. You remember the couplet sung about him when the King of

France took him prisoner? *'Ora il Moro fa la danza!'* That's why it seemed appropriate."

Doran agreed.

"Excellent."

His host went on deliberately:

"As regards what you say concerning partners I've my own doubts. My young sister will certainly expect a dance. She's set on meeting you. This stunt's in her honour, since she joined me here last week." He was peering about in the gay crowd. "There she is! See her costume? It's copied from the famous picture ascribed at first to da Vinci, the beautiful 'Beatrice d'Este.' At least that's how it's figured out on the postcard reproduction. But most of us now decide that it was a portrait of Biance Sforza done by a pupil of Leonardi's. For mercy's sake, don't tell her so! It would cast a blight on the evening."

"Not I!"

Doran smiled, watching the girl as she approached with her sumptuous gown, her auburn hair caught up in a jewelled net and secured by a narrow golden fillet from which hung a pear-shaped pearl. It lay on her smooth young brow above a pair of sparkling eyes, which were turned now in his direction inquiringly. Van Degan called her.

"Nedda! Here's Mr. Doran."

"My, that's great!" The pretty girl pressed his hand in a warm clasp with fingers as small and soft as a child's. She had the delicate grace and charm of a hot-house flower, subtly allied to the frank assurance, half-worldly, half-innocent, of American maidens.

"We'd been counting on having a British hero!" Her glance wandered over him and she pouted, dissatisfied. "Don't you always wear it?" Apparently she ignored the fact that he was in mufti and was searching for the famous medal.

Doran stiffened involuntarily. Van Degan laid a warning arm round his sister's dimpled shoulder.

"Girlie, haven't you learnt yet that an Englishman likes to hide his virtues. They're the only thing he's dead ashamed of!"

"Then I reckon he's got no shame that *counts!*"

She said it so wickedly, with bold bright eyes on the man's face, that he could not resist the laughing attack.

"Can you keep a secret?" His voice was mysterious.

"Sure!" She nodded, and raised herself up on the tips of her golden slippers. "Whisper it!"

Doran complied. He breathed into the pretty ear, but loud enough for Van Degan to catch.

"I've pawned that cross. Don't tell!"

"Oh, you sport!" She clapped her hands, then as the men exchanged glances of amused intelligence. "Did you think I believed you?" she cried hotly. "You can't bluff 'Beatrice d'Este'!"

This combination of modern slang and the name that lingers like an echo of past magnificence and beauty was quainter still for the way it fell delicately from her lips.

Van Degan's eyes rested on her with an open brotherly admiration.

"Isn't she the girl?" he laughed. "I'll have my hands full to-night. Excuse me a moment." He strode off to greet an incoming flood of guests.

Meanwhile "Beatrice d'Este" had turned, practical, to business.

"See here, Mr. Doran. Ten and sixteen? I've kept those for you." She pointed out the pair of numbers on her card. They were marked "V. C."

"That's very kind of you," said the soldier and noted them down on his own programme.

She gave him a dazzling smile.

"I'd like to tell you right away that I'm on your side, a pro-Ally. I've been making mitts and mufflers for you and I've driven Momma into joining a Belgian Relief Fund League. And Big Brother's given us the cheque from his last picture. *Some* help, isn't it?"

"Fine." He said it heartily.

"That's got me!" She made a childish grimace at him. "I reckoned you'd say 'aw-fully nice': And I just *love* the English accent! Big Brother's picking it up since he came to live in Europe. He asked me last night when I'd take my '*bawth*'? Laugh,"—she pronounced it "laff"—"I should think I did!" She danced with mischief.

Doran smiled courteously. Then he remembered the booked numbers.

"I've something serious to confess. I'm no good as a dancing man! So perhaps —"

Still mocking, she caught him up:

"*Cawnt dawnce?* That's sad! Don't say you *cawnt* sit out, or —" She was off like a butterfly, crying back over her wing, "*cawnt* flirt!"

"Try me!" laughed Doran. He was much amused at the encounter.

Van Degan had made his way back, tossing introductions gaily from group to group and words of chaff or admiration over the dresses according to the sex of the wearer, and now stood beside the soldier.

"Well? Did Nedda let you off?"

"No. She's been most generous. What's become of Miss Dalgleish?"

"She's here." Van Degan reassured him. "But she's upstairs in my sister's room getting fixed, with Miss Dark. I lent them the costumes for to-night. I've a regular wardrobe knocking about — a hobby of mine! Wherever I go I invest in the local dress. And they guessed they'd sooner effect the change here, away from their *pension*. Between ourselves, away from Miss Bella too! You'll understand when you see them. Look out for something stunning!" He was off again to play the host.

Doran, unwilling to be a tax on the busy man's leisure moments, sauntered down to the end of the room where the musicians were tuning up, ready for the signal to start.

He had spent two miserable days since his last meeting with Isoël; one of them at Padua and another, through sheer perversity, in the little town on its rocky perch they had discussed at the Lido. More than once he had made up his mind to cut the dance and return home, a week before the allotted time, but he found it hard to frame an excuse to Miss Dalgleish for a change of plans. Moreover, another scruple held him. He wondered uneasily what had happened at the interview between Isoël and the astute Mrs. Serocold, who had given him no signs of life.

Powerless himself in the matter, he could only wait and pray devoutly that if grave trouble threatened the girl she would take him into her confidence.

He knew he could close Tory's mouth if it came to the worst. On the other hand he mistrusted his own powers of control *vis-à-vis* to Isoël.

The thought of her in deep distress and of his own attitude — that of a friend and nothing more, for he still clung to his grave decision — presented a scene of so much strain that he shrank from the possibility. He was torn between the two desires.

He leaned up against the wall, moody and unaware of side-long glances cast at him by pretty girls as they slipped past, chattering with their partners to be. For he cut rather a striking figure in his evening dress which showed off to advantage his fine proportions and great height. The sombre effect stood out against the Carnival of colour. His black hair and sunburnt face, the abstracted stare of his grey eyes under the dark ridge of brow and his unstudied air of command were obvious even in a crowd where smart Italian officers moved with a glitter of silver and blue, the picturesque Cavalry of Savoy.

Two young Americans, arm-in-arm, looked at him and smiled at each other significantly as they strolled past, in search of partners. They put him down as the "frozen type" of Englishman whom they despised. They could not understand a man who had the power, inherited, of withdrawing into his private shell in the midst of a scene of gaiety. They ascribed what was perfectly natural in him to a studied pose and resented it, as an attempt at "superiority."

Had they known that the man was torn to the roots of his being by a passion, hopeless from every point of view, and by the parting confronting him with the girl he so dearly loved, they would have held out eager hands of fellowship with the kindliness of a race humane to the core. But because they had never understood that the "British reserve" is bone deep in a decent man, a part of himself as much as the pride and love of country is in any true American, they saw in it but a matter for sport and widened the gulf between the nations by holding Doran up to scorn for the benefit of their girl friends.

Even the man himself at last became aware of the mockery and the amused ribald glances cast openly in his direction. Unconsciously it added to the friction caused by his warring thoughts and, when the band dashed into a Two-step at Van Degan's nod, an incident forced Doran into a more aggressive mood.

The taller American of the pair had made a low extravagant bow to a pretty "Pierrette," standing close to the musicians, seized her gaily round the waist and whirled her off, manœuvring to impede the progress of his friend who was following with the girl's sister. The couple dodged from side to side, skipping grotesquely and forcing the pair in their wake to halt or risk a collision, anathematized by the victims.

Doran looked up and scowled.

"Clowns!" He said beneath his breath. The misunderstanding was complete.

Then he saw Miss Van Degan, light as a feather, swirl past. She gave him the sauciest of nods and Doran's glum face cleared. He watched her gay and triumphant progress and saw her halt instinctively before a girl without a partner, capture her and bring her back, the pair carefully screened from encounters with flying couples by their escort.

He did not realize in the least that he was involved in their return until she came up beside him.

"Mr. Doran." She tapped his arm. "May I introduce Miss Mamie Gibson? You'll sure *love* one another!" and with this and a little pat of farewell on his sleeve, she was off, like thistledown, in her partner's clasp.

Doran meanwhile began to confess somewhat nervously that he was forbidden to take an active part in the dance.

"I know. Nedda explained to me. Isn't she a dream to-night?" Miss Mamie proceeded to set him at ease, pointing out the various costumes, with a bird-like motion of her head and pretty little restless hands, as they sat together against the wall.

The dance was of short duration and in the hush that followed its close there came a sound of wooden shoes, clattering beyond the open door. Then, into the room,

joyfully, ran the quaintest looking couple. A Dutchman in huge sabots with balloon like trousers of faded blue, a short jacket and a little round cap set at a jaunty angle on his slightly wavy, iron-grey hair, a pipe in the corner of his mouth. On his arm hung a slender girl with smaller clogs and dainty ankles visible under her short full skirts, her laughing face framed in a cap with two wing-like projections of lace. Beneath this, heavy plaits of shining honey-coloured hair swung almost to her knees.

Doran sprang to his feet.

"It's Judy, by Jove!—and Isoël." He remembered the girl beside him. "Some friends of mine," he explained. "Do let's go and look at them."

"Aren't they cunning?" said his partner. "I'd like to dance with that jolly Dutchman."

"You shall!" Doran laughed in his sleeve. "Come along and be introduced." For Judy's sex must have puzzled many of the strangers crowding round the pair. She looked the part to the life.

"And we've got our dancing shoes inside," he heard Isoël explain as they came up close behind them. "Look!" She drew out of one sabot a foot encased in a satin slipper of poppy-red that matched her stockings, the only bright splash of colour in the neutral-tinted dress.

"*Look!*" Judy mimicked her in her deep voice and, amidst a roar of laughter from the lookers-on, exposed in turn a dancing pump, narrow but of masculine cut, then thrust it back into its "boat."

She started to clatter the clogs on the floor, then stopped for further mischief.

"Dey vos very useful grossing de dykes, vos dey not, my sveet Vrouw?" She tucked a hand through Isoël's arm who responded promptly:

"Ja wöhl, Pieter. Ven you fell in, de las' time, after von leetle glass of Schnapps and I fished you aus mit a boathook!"

"And tore me pants," said Judy, shameless. "But Mynheer Van Degan lent us pins. Oddervise—" she spread out her hands with a broad shrug that spoke volumes. The band had started again with a waltz. "Komm!" She kicked away her sabots, seized Isoël

and was off with a wild turn that sent the girl's skirts whirling, her little feet raised from the floor for a moment, but safe herself in those strong arms.

Down the empty room they swept. People turned and watched, amazed. For Judy was a superb dancer. Like many largely-made women she moved smoothly in perfect time, her head erect, the joy of action in her clean-cut glowing face; and Isoël seemed to yield to her, supple, light, lost herself in the enjoyment of the moment.

Van Degan came up to Doran.

"Well," he asked. "Are you satisfied?"

"It's a ripping get-up!" He was still laughing. "Judy's in her element."

"She's a handsome woman," said the painter. He saw his guest's incredulous glance. "Yes, it's true. Look at her. A splendid head — those wide brows and the hair shading from black to silver. I'd like to do a portrait of her."

"I wish you would. Just as she is!" Doran was inwardly amused. Then a hint of wistfulness in the other's face checked his mirth.

"She wouldn't agree," said Van Degan. "I've often asked her to sit to me. For the last ten years, on and off, when I used to have a flat in Paris and a studio out Passy way. When she makes up that mind of hers I opine it would take *some* persuasion to get her to change it. An earthquake might do it, but, short of that, I'm not hopeful."

He smiled, with a little shrug of the shoulders, and moved off among his guests. Doran wondered. Then his thoughts returned again to Isoël. He could not keep his eyes from her. She looked so childish, so utterly happy, the long beautiful plaits of hair swinging above her dainty waist, clipped by Judy's strong right arm.

He willed them to come to a halt the next time they should pass, where he stood close to the door and a touch of triumph lit up his face as the spell worked. Judy cried:

"Hullo, Francis!" and pulled up. "What do you think of this rig-out?"

"That you'll both be breaking hearts to-night!" He spoke in a careless, laughing voice.

"Can't answer for Isoël. But *I* mean to! I'm off now to secure a dance with the fair Nedda. See you later."

Doran was left with her late partner. He held out his hand for her card.

"What may I have?"

It was somewhat formal but she did not seem to notice it. The sight of her lover reminded her of the parting ahead, and her gaiety vanished.

"What do you want?" she asked softly.

Doran gave her a quick glance and saw the sadness in her eyes.

"Want?" He pulled himself together and wrote his name in four places. "Is that unfair?" He handed the card back and added, "I don't dance and it seems a shame to tie you down to sitting-out with such a crock. So if you feel inclined to cut one, let me know."

She smiled slowly.

"I will."

The answer was unexpected. Doran was not at all accustomed to find that people evaded his dances.

Before he could frame a laughing retort, Van Degan brought up some other men and they clustered round the picturesque figure, making her open compliments, the competition for her favours waxing warm and evoking chaff.

Doran moodily withdrew. Then he felt a tap on his arm. It was Judy, who had failed to discover the whereabouts of her young hostess.

"Come out and have a smoke?" She guessed that this old friend of hers was conscious of being at a disadvantage among this youthful, healthy crowd and pitied him all the more in that dancing was his forte.

"Happy thought!" His face cleared. "Where shall we go? You know the ropes."

"I do. Van Degan, like a Spaniard, has laid his whole house at my feet." They moved out into the passage.

"Only his house?" asked Doran slyly.

Judy shot him a sharp glance. Then she gave an impatient sigh.

"No," she said with her usual candour. "Since you seem to be so well-informed. But, my dear Francis, look

at me! Can you picture me as an artist's wife?" Her laugh sounded a little forced.

It roused all Doran's chivalry.

"Yes, I can — in every way. Now I come to think of it, you're not unlike a very famous modern painter. I'm speaking of Rosa Bonheur. I believe the life would suit you too, unconventional and free, and I speak from experience." He gave her a sunny smile. "As regards the man — Van Degan himself — I like him. He's sincere. That's a big start in the game of marriage."

His voice had changed on the last words with a flat and hopeless intonation. They were climbing narrow stairs by now in the older part of the building. Judy stopped, rather abruptly, and laid a hand on his arm.

"What's the matter, old chap? Have you fallen out with Isoël?" As he did not answer her at once, she added warningly, "If so, you stand no sporting chance to-night unless you make it up. All the men are after her!"

Doran winced; then swore softly.

"That's right! Do you good. It's rough luck. I sympathize. But why not go in and win?"

Having proffered her word of advice, she moved on up the stairs and opened a door at the top. A cool wind poured down on them.

"Hurry up! It's going to bang."

He followed her, just in time, and stepped out upon the leads. Beyond them was a little tower, built upon the flat roof and holding a narrow cushioned bench. It had been arranged by Van Degan for summer nights to catch the view of the lagoon far away and the spires and cupolas of the city.

On either side was a deep tub filled with plants where a stunted creeper was endeavouring to please its owner by straggling up round the doorway.

Many an hour had Van Degan spent here in solitude over his pipe dreaming of the eccentric woman, who now, garbed like a man, was letting her big heart overflow with sympathy for another case of love-affairs gone awry.

"Sit there!" Judy ordered, and settled herself on the step, her back against the wooden door-post, her profile framed by the starry sky.

Doran obeyed her listlessly. She pulled out her cigarettes from a pocket in the vast trousers and dived again for her match-box.

The man above her made up his mind.

"Judy. Tell me what you know. About Miss Dark." His voice was hoarse.

She nodded her grey well-shaped head.

"So that's it!" She shielded the light with her brown hands, cupped together. "Some one been up to the old mischief."

"What mischief?" He took the match she offered, solemnly blew it out and lit another for himself.

This proof of absent-mindedness brought a twinkle to her eyes.

"I'd better start from the beginning — Bella and her 'little birds.'" She seemed to be talking to herself. "But if this is Rosamund Percival's work I'll wring her neck! And Phipps's too." For she thought he had been the tale-bearer. "Can't stand that young man." She smoked for a minute, whilst Doran waited. "It was like this —" She started in earnest.

Doran's eyes never left her. Once he gave an odd sound, a stifled exclamation of wonder, but Judy, calmly ignoring it, proceeded with the history of Gervase Dark and "Uncle Roger's" indiscreet revelations, edited by Rosamund. When she came to the finale where she had flattened the mischief-maker by the news that this girl whom she despised was well-connected, Doran's face had cleared at last of its heavy trouble.

"Do you mind telling me," he asked in a husky, suppressed voice, "who these connections actually are?"

"Not a bit!" Judy smiled. "I found out by an accident. Over her bag — her dressing-bag — which was an old-fashioned, silly affair with fittings engraved with a coronet. It had been left her by her cousin, the late Lady Manister. It came out quite naturally, in the course of conversation."

"Thank you." Doran sat up and squared his shoulders. His eyes were shining. "Judy," he said. "I've always known what a pal you were, one of the best! No need to dwell on that. But now that you've done this for *her*, upon my soul I'm going to kiss you."

Before she had time to cry out he had caught her by both shoulders and administered a hearty salute on either firm sun-burnt cheek.

"There! Now you can box my ears! I deserve it — for more than this."

But the ring of youth in his voice, the real affection underlying the frank embrace had touched Judy, wiping out all sense of insult.

"Lord love us!" She stared at him, then went off in a peal of laughter. "Hoots, Francie, ye're daft, me lad! And this night — of all nights! Have ye no respect for me trews?" She extended a fold of the vast trousers on either side with a finger and thumb. Then rocked herself on the doorstep. "To be kissed like a girl at her first party! What on earth would Bella say? Upon my life, I think I'll tell her and she'll write and ask you your intentions."

At this Doran joined in. They laughed until the tears appeared and Judy wiped her eyes, still shaking.

"I've been a damned fool, Judy." Doran suddenly sobered down. "The worst of it is, I can't explain. But you've shown me the way out."

Judy nodded silently and lit another cigarette. The night was so still that they could hear the faint cries of the gondoliers as they bore their boat-loads homewards from the evening music on the water. Behind them in the distant harbour a siren rose with its weird music, half sob, half scream, from a big steamer outward bound. Then the silence fell again.

Doran was staring into space. Judy stole a glance at him and averted her eyes. She felt lonely. For a fleeting moment she wished that Van Degan was by her side. An immense depression weighed on her spirit, she was tired of the rôle she set herself, the passive one of "looking on." Was there no happiness for her, personal and intimate? She stood up, with a little shake of her ruffled masculine disguise.

"There's one thing more I can do for you." Her deep voice was a little unsteady. Doran jumped. Then smiled up at the quaint figure in the doorway. Before he could speak she had added quickly, "And that's leave you. So long!"

She was gone with a brave laugh.

"Hold hard!" He sprang up and followed her across the leads. "Judy!" he cried as he reached the door. It was slammed in his face, and he stopped, baffled.

No use pursuing her. And Judy "always understood."

It is a phrase offered freely to the unselfish at every crisis. For the man — or woman — who can sink his personal troubles at the sight of a friend in need of sympathy has many calls on his generosity and in time receives the obscure reward of a reputation for "good-nature"!

Doran returned to his old seat. The enigma was solved. No wonder the girl was secretive about her past with such a parent in the background. Poor, too, compelled to earn her living by any means at hand. He guessed that her youthful education had gone in the *débâcle* which had left no pension to the widow, no social support to the orphaned girl. The whole story was pitiful! She shrank, doubtless, from disclosing her life at Clotilde's for fear it should raise the query of how she had come to this pass. For her sensitive pride was evident.

So he reasoned, blinded by love, throwing doubt to the winds of heaven. Meanwhile the girl was his equal, a fit wife socially. More — and this thought had rankled — a fit mother for his children. To Gervase Dark he gave scant thought. What if he had been a rascal? Was there ever an old family without a black sheep in the fold?

He knew the Manisters by name; Catholics with an ancient title. This one had probably been Isoël's cousin, through the father, with a sneaking pity for the outcast. Here, too, was an explanation of the girl's trip to the South. No doubt Lady Manister had left her a little legacy and Isoël had launched out on this much-needed holiday before her proposed munition work.

The pieces all slipped into place in the jig-saw puzzle of romance. He could afford now to smile at that lie which had raised such a barrier between them. For, although he still regretted it, he sympathized with the girl he loved. To let Tory Serocold — of all people — into

her secret? It was too deep a wound to her pride. But he wondered again what had transpired at the fateful interview.

Then for the first time that night a shadow of doubt obscured his vision. Had he been too sure himself that Isoël returned his passion?

No. He could see those pleading eyes raised to his in the dark box, hear the quiver in her voice when she said that she would "miss the guide." His blood warmed at the memory. She was his — he was certain — for the asking!

He leaned forward and gazed out into a world strange to him: a land of roofs and twisted chimneys pierced by graceful campanile and the distant golden domes of St. Mark's.

The sky above was deeply blue, spangled with stars, and a baby moon pointed above the far-off water, smooth as velvet, that met the heavens beyond the darker blue of the Lido. Nearer appeared a flickering crescent of lamps that straggled along the Riva to disappear for a space and rise again from the Giudecca.

Venice! He stretched out his arms to her. She had brought him the happy days of his youth and the purest ideal of his manhood. With the impulsive action he felt the need to hold in his strong embrace the living, breathing form of the woman who had awakened not passion alone but a finer emotion, love itself, that could only be satisfied by marriage.

A campanile pealed out the hour, silvery tongued and the note was repeated from every quarter, until the air, still and fragrant, was charged with vibrations and the lingering echoes over the water.

In a sudden panic he sprang to his feet. Heavens! Had he missed her dance?

The thought acted like a spur and sent him hot foot down the stairs.

CHAPTER XXI

ISOËL tasted to the full that night the triumph that youth and beauty, and that more insidious gift of the gods, "charm," can bring to its fair possessor.

Often had she dreamed in the dark, whilst the trains roared past and shook the room that she shared with Patty in gloomy London, of some wonderful faëry entertainment in which she would shine like Cinderella.

And here, at her very first dance, the vision had materialized. She could have filled her card twice over, and a riot of joy took hold of her that brought a sparkle to her eyes, a delicate colour to her cheeks.

The only tiny flaw in the evening was the remark let fall by Doran; that casual suggestion that she should "cut" one of his dances if she wished it. And every now and then she scanned the gay crowd for his lean, dark face, annoyed that he should hold aloof and be no witness of her triumph.

Yet, perhaps — so the girl reasoned — he had meant it as an unselfish tribute, galled that he, too, could not assume an active part in the gaiety.

She wished that his first dance had been one of the earlier ones instead of half-way down her crowded card; but time was flying on swift wings and now, as she made her way back to the studio on her partner's arm — that same young American who had levied his wit on the man she loved at the commencement of the party — she felt that she had reached the climax of this wonderful hour of her life. For Doran would surely be waiting for her, with a hungry light in his keen grey eyes.

Her partner was loath to relinquish her. A somewhat susceptible young man, he had fallen a victim to the charm of this graceful girl with her foreign accent, quick brain and delicate beauty. He had no scruple in letting her see it. Isoël, amused and flattered, not averse to hearing herself described as a "peach," enjoyed it the more for the knowledge that he was smoothing the way for a more

perilous encounter. Braced by a sense of her power she felt in the mood to conquer Doran, sweep him, too, off his steady feet — this faëry prince who still held back!

But a quick frown succeeded her smile when she looked round the long room. For the soldier was nowhere to be seen.

The dance, a new and popular waltz, began with a quick succession of chords that slipped into the measured beat invitingly, and a few couples quickly seized the chance of enjoying a turn whilst the space was unrestricted.

Isoël's partner glanced at her.

"Say, hasn't he turned up? Then let's have one spin first. I'll play fair and hand you over as soon as he blows in on us. Come?"

His arm stole round her waist, his eagerness was infectious. It awoke an echo of mischief in her.

"All right." Away they whirled, their steps in perfect harmony. "He suggested himself that I should cut it," Isoël thought, annoyed with Doran. "I'm certainly not going to wait about for milord to saunter up and claim me. Not with a partner who dances like this!"

Sheer joy of movement seized her, she gave herself up to dreamy delight. Then as they went more warily to avoid the incoming rush of people, she caught a glimpse of the defaulter and an angry light came into her eyes.

For Nedda Van Degan stood beside him, laughing up into his face. She had seen him bolting down the stairs and was teasing him in the doorway where they were checked by a sudden crush.

"Flying from your fate?" she asked. "I guess you've been out on the roof, flirting. Look at your sleeve! It's white with dust. Or powder?" Her mirth ran over. She flicked it with the lace fragment she called her pocket-handkerchief. "Don't ask *me* to sit out with you by and by. I'm easily scared!"

"I shan't let you off," said Doran. "You put me on my mettle, remember." He was forcing his way into the room with as much strength as he dared use, too happy in the memory of Judy's words, to resent the momentary delay. "You 'watch out,'" he warned Nedda. "I'm dangerous when I'm roused."

"I sure believe you!" She laughed back, as they slipped through triumphantly.

Then he saw Isoël.

She skimmed past him, light as a bird, clasped close in her partner's arm, her head brushing his square shoulder. The young man's face was slightly flushed; he was whispering, lips close to her ear. It looked like an ardent flirtation.

"Well — I'm dashed!" thought the soldier. He moved across to his old corner and stood up against the wall, a prey to sudden jealousy, his gaze riveted on the pair as though by sheer hypnotic force he could bring the truants to his feet.

But the girl, fully aware of his presence, gave no hint of it to her partner.

"I'll teach him a lesson!" she cried in her heart. "It's his turn to wait now."

They passed so close to the silent figure that a fragment of their conversation reached him in Isoël's clear voice:

"Of course I'll come. Two o'clock."

Doran scowled as he heard it. They were making plans for a meeting elsewhere. Confound them! At the next turn they reached the door, halted, laughed, and without a look in his direction, passed out, talking gaily, into the corridor beyond.

This was more than Doran could stand. He strode after them, shoulders squared, and caught them up at the bend of the stairs.

"Miss Dark!"

She turned, with a well-feigned start, gave a little "Oh!" of chagrin and a mischievous glance up at her partner. It said, plain for all to read: "There — we're caught! What shall we do?"

"This is *my* dance, I believe." Doran looked now the part of the "frozen Englishman" to perfection.

The American's blue eyes twinkled.

"Why, it's that mutt!" he thought, amused.

Isoël glanced down at her card.

"Yes. You're right! But you didn't turn up?" She smiled wickedly at Doran. "Besides, you gave me leave to cut it."

Their eyes met and there ensued a short breathless battle of wills.

The American became restless. He was quite willing to score off the man before him yet he felt a qualm that he was "in wrong" himself. He decided to back up his partner.

"I guess we waited," he began.

Doran ignored him utterly, not with intentional discourtesy but because he simply didn't count in a matter so vital concerning the girl. In his present exaggerated mood he felt that the happiness of his life would depend on the issue of this duel.

Isoël laughed. It was less in mischief than from a touch of nervousness. She lacked the experience which would have taught her how to act at this juncture; and, already, a shade of regret, tinged with a curious fear, was dimming the triumph she had planned.

To her surprise Doran joined in. He had himself in hand again. Two could play at this game! Her amusement had been a sting to his pride.

"I see." His voice was cool and polite. "My fault, all along. I apologize for the interruption." And with this he turned quietly and went downstairs, his head high.

But before he reached the last step he felt a touch upon his arm.

"Francis!"

He wheeled round. Isoël had followed him. She stood now on the step above, beautiful in her pallor, her eyes wide with apprehension.

"*Mon Dieu!*" she said under her breath. "I thought —I thought—" Her hands went out in a foreign gesture oddly helpless. "You didn't come—" Her mouth quivered.

Doran's anger was swept aside by a sudden wave of fierce longing.

"Do you want me?" His voice was hoarse. "Or would you rather dance with *him?*"

At another time she would have smiled at the scorn sounding in the pronoun, but now she scarcely noticed it. For in playing with fire she had burnt her fingers.

"If you care for the rest of the dance," she faltered,

"Care?" Although he spoke in a whisper the passion breathed into the word made it quiver.

She drew back, her cheeks flaming, with a cry of startled joy and fear.

Doran leaned nearer her.

"You *know* I care." His keen grey eyes seemed to probe her deepest thoughts. "Come!" He was standing by her now, a hand slipped through her arm, and unresisting she let him lead her up the shallow stairs again.

The American stood on the landing above, perplexed at the vagaries of the girl and uncertain as to his line of conduct.

Doran paused when they reached him.

"I'm sorry to spoil your dance," he said. "But there's been a mistake. It's mine, by rights."

"Sure." The other man nodded. He gave the girl a shrewd glance and she smiled shamefacedly.

Doran waited for no more.

"This way." With an air of possession he swept her up the next flight.

Van Degan passed them, with a smile; then cannoned into his other guests on the landing below, half lost in shadow.

"Pardon! Hello — it's Heddon! Haven't you got a partner for this?"

"I had. But she's been marooned. Who's the fellow who's carried her off. I mean the little Dutch lady."

"Oh, that's Doran, the V. C. Some hero!" the host laughed. He related a part of the soldier's exploit.

"You don't say!" Heddon stared. Then he gave a little chuckle. "He's out to win or die to-night. I was wondering what she saw in him."

"He's a good chap," said Van Degan. "I used to know his father, the painter, years ago. David Doran. He did that sketch of the Rialto in the rain you boys were talking about."

"Is that so?" The other nodded. "Then I'll wish his son good luck." He spoke from a generous impulse. "I should say that was going to be a match!"

He jerked his head towards the stairs, laughed, then swallowed a quick sigh as he followed his host, the memory of the pretty girl still warm in his heart.

Meanwhile the pair discussed had reached the narrow door to the roof. Doran unlatched it and held it back.

"Take care! There's a step down." He watched the little red slippers cautiously feel for the dusty leads.

"Where are we?" She looked about her.

But Doran moved quickly ahead. The tower was empty. He thanked high heaven! The doubt had rankled in his mind.

"In here." He guided her and stood for a moment on the threshold drinking in the picture she made beneath the moon with her quaint lace cap framing closely her sweet young face against the background of wor stone.

Her eyes fell on the seat beside her. Surely there would not be room for two upon the narrow cushioned bench?

Doran solved the problem boldly. Before she could cry out or escape she found herself in his strong arms.

"Isoël!"

He bent his head and drank deep of the cup of delight. He felt her tremble and shrink back; then, as his lips still pressed hers, she gave a breathless little sob, her soft hands stole round his neck and she clung to him with the swift surrender of body and soul to the call of love.

Her utter abandonment sobered him; though it brought its full measure of triumph. It awoke the man's protective instincts and with an effort he drew away, his eyes eager for her face. He read in it all he needed; even to the swift shame that succeeded her first tremulous smile and the hot flood of colour that stained her cheeks pale from that moment of passion.

For now a sudden sharp misgiving seized the girl; a memory of that far-off scene at the Lido. She slipped from his arms in a quick revolt against the weakness that had seized her, her bosom heaving, eyes startled, fencing him off with desperate hands.

"*Non, non!*" Her voice broke. "It ees not fair! When I *told* you—"

Doran, as quickly, understood.

"About *the* man?"

She nodded, frowning.

"Why, my sweet; that was just why I did it. I wanted to make sure of you!" He laughed aloud, impenitent. "You can't get out of marrying me! Not *now*. Remember your promise."

She drew a deep, sobbing breath. It had come at last — the Vision Splendid! Here he knelt, her fairy prince offering her the half of his kingdom. And, better than all her wildest dreams, he was the man who had won her heart.

Doran wondered at her silence. With the impatience of the lover he wanted to hear the truth from her lips.

"Come here!" He reached up an arm about her, masterful. "No, I'll be good. I give you my word. Say you love me?"

She shook her head.

"I can't — like that!" She was suddenly shy. Then as she saw his face darken, with a swift movement she bent down and breathed in his ear, "*Je t'adore!*"

"Ah!" He drew her down to his side. Her head lay against his shoulder, a plait of honey-coloured hair fell, heavy, across his knee. He smoothed it with trembling fingers.

"It's beautiful. Like spun silk!"

"Not so beautiful as these." She touched the scars upon his hand, lightly and caressingly. "If only you knew how proud I am!" Her voice quivered as though the tears were not far from her dark eyes. "Let me say so — just this once! I know you hate to be reminded, but the thought of your courage is, to me, like a wonderful crown of glory — I can't believe this is not a dream. *Dear* hands —" Before he could guess her intention he felt her soft lips pressed to them. He snatched them away.

"My dear, you mustn't! You make me ashamed."

He was touched to the quick, so he tried to joke. "It's such a sinful waste," he told her. "If you feel as generous as all that —" He left her no doubt as to what he meant. But now, forewarned, she evaded him.

"When did you find out?" she asked.

"That I loved you? I can't say. When I gave you back your Baedeker."

She laughed at this, happily.

"Fancy if I hadn't left it — care of the pigeons! What a disaster!"

"I should have found some other way." Doran smiled to himself. But the girl was looking thoughtful now. Those fluttering birds in the Piazza had reminded her of the great gold Church and the chapel of St. Isidore which had witnessed her childish vow. "Well," he smiled down into her eyes. "Tell me what you're dreaming about? You mustn't have any secrets from me. That's the first of our bargains."

A shadow dimmed the Vision Splendid. Secrets? She knew, to her cost, that these would always stand between them. She felt the menace of the future. Still she could confess to this one. She did so very simply.

"And I mean to be," she concluded.

"A good wife? I know that." His own eyes were a little dim as he pictured the slender kneeling figure in the misty aisles of St. Mark's. Carrying the thought farther he asked her, a shade abruptly:

"You'll want to be married, I suppose, in a Catholic church?"

"Yes, of course."

He smiled at her look of wonder.

"So you shall. We'll arrange all that, though I think we'll have the knot secured in the gloomy abode of the Registrar before or afterwards. By the way,"— he slipped off his signet ring and placed it on her third finger —"until I can get you a better one, you might as well wear this. Don't forget you're my property!" He laughed and added teasingly, "It will help to ward off the attentions of ardent young Americans."

"Mr. Heddon?" She smiled and dimpled, her eyes still fixed on the heavy ring. "I think you were very rude to him. It wasn't his fault. He didn't know!"

"Oh, *didn't* he? That's a confession!"

"Well, you said I might cut it. And I thought you always spoke the truth!" She raised a mischievous face to his.

"It is rather a habit of mine." His face went a little grim. "As a matter of fact I relied upon your sympathy for my moment of temper! I used to be very

keen on dancing and it rubbed me up the wrong way to feel that I was out of it." He went on more lightly, "I'm inclined to believe that sitting-out is a much more perilous adventure."

"It's not too late to draw back!" She laughed, then laid a hand on his arm. "Francis — look at me. Do you think you will ever regret to-night?"

"*My dear!*" He kissed her. "How absurd!" He did not question the remark. He thought that it was prompted by the tragedy surrounding her childhood and the knowledge of her father's disgrace. He took a vow then and there never to force her confidence, to let no shadow of the truth dim the week that lay before them. "I'm not going to let you talk like that. It sounds as if you put me down as a changeable person, moved by impulse. And I'm not that — by a long chalk! I mayn't be fond of many people, but those I care for count with me. You'll find me hard to shake off, if that's your plan!" He was laughing now. Then a new idea occurred to him. "By the way, I suppose I ought to tell you that I've been engaged once before. It was only a boy and girl affair, but still —" He shrugged his broad shoulders.

"I know. To Mrs. Serocold."

Doran started.

"Did she tell you?"

"Yes."

He saw in Isoël's face a sudden flash of jealousy. His own was a trifle angry too.

"Why? I mean —" He bit his lip.

"I think she guessed how matters stood." Isoël was rather nervous. "We had — a little disagreement. Oh, don't let's talk about her now! I think she believed that the news would wound me. As if I cared about your past!" She snapped her fingers contemptuously. "When we've got the present and the future."

"Yes. You're right." His face softened. "What are we going to do to-morrow? Would you be too tired to come with me for a long day to Chioggia?"

"Tired? No. I should love it. I shall have to put Mr. Heddon off. He was going to take me out to see a real live hydroplane! It seems that he's '*some* flyer'

himself, in his native land, though he's over here studying art with Mr. Van Degan."

"Well, he'd better stick to it," Doran suggested. "I'm not going to share you with any one."

"You could go off with the fair Nedda."

"By Jove!" He pulled out his watch. "It's supper-time and I've cut her dance. Nice thing to do to your hostess."

"You shouldn't be so absent-minded." Isoël rose to her feet, laughing. "And then blame others who are the same."

"Oh, give me five minutes more?" he pleaded. "It can't make any difference now and I've hardly had a word with you. We'll talk our real business to-morrow — but tonight —" He held out his arms to her.

"Happy?" he asked a few minutes later.

"Too happy. Will it last?"

Again he caught the wistful note.

"I can answer for myself," said Doran. He went on thoughtfully. "I've never known love before. It's the strongest thing in my life — a long way beyond the pull of ambition. It sweeps everything before it, even my love for my country. I never thought the day would come when I should regret the chances of war. But now — I don't want to go! I believe it's making a coward of me."

"*Must* you?" Her voice quivered.

"Yes, darling." He stroked her hair. "But we've got a golden week before us. More, I hope. If it comes to the worst, will you marry me before I go?"

"To the Front?"

Doran nodded his head.

He thought the immediate prospect unlikely and a faint sense of shame seized him. Was he playing upon the girl's pity?

But beneath this was a finer motive. Never again should Isoël be faced with a struggle for existence. He could not bear the thought that she should return to the old drudgery even for a few months, and he guessed her resources to be slender. Apart from his own strong desire for a speedy marriage he saw clearly that it would safeguard the woman he loved and the excuse seemed sufficient. It could not wound her sensitive pride.

Isoël's heart beat fast. How it would solve all her troubles!

"If you want me to." She whispered the words.

"I do." His voice was solemn now. "You see, dear heart, it's like this. I think that we've not nearly reached the turning-point of this war. I'm not one of the optimists. There's a time coming when every one will feel the pinch, and I couldn't go and leave you to face it all alone without making things safe for you. Luckily I'm a wealthy man, and although money's a poor thing compared to love, it's some help, anyhow, at a crisis like this.

"Another important point is in case anything happened to me —" He felt her shrink and went on quickly. "I don't mean *that* — but if I were wounded, you'd get a pull as my wife. You could probably come out to me if I were in hospital abroad. It would be harder still to leave you — afterwards. But then how fine to feel we'd stolen our honeymoon!"

He stared out into the night. "Think of it, Isoël. You and I, alone together." His face worked with sudden passion. "Say you will?"

She nodded her head. The tears were standing in her eyes.

"Oh," she cried, "how I hate this war! It's senseless, wicked cruelty. What have we done, you and I, to be punished? How can God allow it?"

He soothed her, moved himself.

"We've not suffered like many people. And it brought us together, after all. I'm almost inclined to bless that bullet — though I've cursed it pretty often since. Cheer up, old lady! I don't think there's an earthly chance that I shall be passed for active service. Not yet, anyhow." His arm stole round her again. "But I vote we get married, all the same, even if it's a home job. Do you agree?"

His voice was eager but now caution returned to the girl. It would never do to jump at it or it might arouse his suspicions.

"That depends." She looked wise.

"On what?" He gave her a searching glance. He saw her smile and, into her eyes where the long lashes

were still wet, there stole a little hint of mischief. "I believe you're only pulling my leg?"

"Not at all! There's my trousseau. Perhaps you think I'll be married in this?" She straightened the wings of her lace cap on either side of her flushed cheeks.

"Why not?" He laughed back. "Though it gets confoundedly in the way. The Dutch must be a moral race. Oh, dash!—"

Some one had opened the door to the roof and voices drifted across to them.

"Quick!" said Doran. "Just one? . . . Ah! Now we'll clear out and give those other beggars a chance."

PART III

THE DREAMER AWAKES

CHAPTER XXII

"THIS is the bluest day of all!" Isoël lowered her leaf-coloured sunshade to shield her eyes from the steady glare that beat back from the water.

"I hope you only allude to the sky," Doran commented lazily.

They were drifting along by the low shore of Malamocca, rendered vivid by the green strips of market gardens that supply the busy *Erberia* with its wealth of fruit and vegetables. A pair of barges with red-brown sails lay becalmed upon their right, waiting for a puff of wind, and some sea-mews were clustering round a floating mass of rusty seaweed, uttering their discordant cries. Apart from these patches of neutral colour the whole picture, as Isoël said, was a brilliant symphony in blue, from the cloudless heavens to the lagoon.

"*I* don't feel it, if that's what you mean." She smiled at him with half-closed eyes as the gondola moved imperceptibly, gently propelled by Giovanni.

Lovers — as he knew them to be — cast no thought for the passing hours. What need to hasten? The day was young and life an apparently endless affair.

He had lunched at the Excelsior, where his patron had played host to the girl, and he had the easy temperament of a race inured to constant *feste* with the privileges of the Sabbath. "*Domani*" was his favourite word: "to-morrow" for work! Meanwhile to-day was a sleepy bridge across the hours that brought him nearer to energy.

Doran's head slipped lower. He was drowsy with the great heat.

"Talk to me!" He slid out a hand and played with the long string of shells that hung from the girl's white neck and swayed with each gentle rock of the boat.

"I don't want to. I'm dreaming of Phipps."

The remark had the desired effect. Doran stirred.

"Pleasant for me!" He gave her necklace a little tug.

"If you break those I'll never forgive you." She stole a mischievous glance at him, and sighed. "To think that he's gone away — that we've said good-bye — that it's all over!"

"A good business," laughed the soldier.

"Wait till you hear who he's gone with!" For Phipps could never keep a secret and certainly not the present one concerning Mrs. Serocold, which had flattered his youthful vanity.

"Who?" Doran watched her face, pale under the faint green light of her parasol. It made her lips more vividly red by force of contrast.

"You can't guess? A well-dressed lady who doesn't 'approve' of the war and calls Venice a 'dull hole' and Paris"— she dimpled —"'too divvy'!"

"Tory? Well, I'm blessed!" Doran chuckled. "Who told you?"

"Who but the *preux chevalier* himself! He's not modest over his conquests. They eloped by the early train. Quite a scandal at the *pension!* The Percivals turned up at the station to see him off — as a 'surprise'! Mrs. Serocold was furious; pretended it was an accident. But the funniest part of the affair"— Isoël's eyes were dancing with mischief —"was that Phipps had arranged to change his ticket, a third-class one, with the maid. When we all arrived unexpectedly to bid him a fond farewell, the fair lady became discreet and kept Thérèse glued to her side. So Phipps had to scramble in with a crowd of peasants and babies and garlic. You never saw any one so disgusted! At the last moment Judy bought a Bologna sausage and handed it in through the window for his lunch, wishing him *'buon appetito'!*"

"Isn't that just like her?" Doran laughed heartily. "Why didn't you let me join in the fun?"

"We didn't know until too late. Judy planned it all last night. I presented a bunch of flowers tied up with white ribbon and finished off with a paper doyley which I stole from under a plate of biscuits as I came through the dining-room.

"I saw him pitch it out of the window when the train

left the platform. He was white with anger, and Rosamund was nearly as bad. Of course the Percivals knew nothing. The lady with the granite crown gave Mrs. Serocold such a glance! I only wish you could have seen it. Judy and I got there early and we hid in the refreshment-room and watched the meeting of the lovers. Smart wasn't the word for her! Such a wonderful travelling coat — she looked like a London bride!"

"You ought to be more sympathetic," Doran reminded her.

"That's exactly what Judy said! I told her the secret coming home."

"About us?"

Isoël nodded. She had wisely kept their engagement dark until she had seen her enemy safely out of the neighbourhood.

"Was she surprised?" Doran smiled.

"Not a bit. It fell quite flat; although she was awfully nice about it. She's rather worried, just now. Miss Van Degan's still a wreck. A dreadful thing their getting the news on the morning after the party. As her brother puts it, she's 'delicate-minded' and she feels it too terribly — that they all should have been dancing gaily, with their friends at the bottom of the sea."

She referred to the latest Hun outrage, the sinking of the *Lusitania,* torpedoed that fateful Friday.

"Yet, it's the limit." Doran scowled. "Did she know any people on board?"

"Several. A girl whom she is fond of, Miss Mamie Gibson, lost both her mother and sister! And one of Mr. Van Degan's pupils — such a promising young artist — is also among the list of missing. Then there's poor Mr. Heddon. You remember him?" Doran nodded. "His best friend, a college chum, died in one of the open boats. He was badly wounded in the explosion. Mr. Heddon's broken-hearted, vowing vengeance on the Huns. If America doesn't take drastic action, he's going straight off to France to join up in the flying corps."

"I respect him," said Doran simply.

"So do I." But her voice was absent, for something fresh upon the shore had roused her curiosity.

They were nearing a little settlement of scattered houses around a church, washed a pale ochre colour with a row of saints on the top who looked as though they were mustering courage to dive into the water below. A pier jutted out from the beach and above was a little *campo* where a group of children were scrambling round some hidden object excitedly. Barefooted, and dressed in rags of faded colour, they marked a note of human interest in the picture of sleepy heat and shuttered dwellings.

"I wonder what they've got there?" Isoël was curious. "Listen!"

They could hear shrill cries as the urchins hustled one another pushing their way to the centre.

"Can't we go a little closer?"

Doran turned to Giovanni and they stole up beside the pier.

"You don't want to get out, do you? It's so dusty, and think of the fleas!" He laughed as he saw her quick grimace. "This is their happy hunting-ground — you don't know Venice in the Summer! The flora perhaps but not the fauna, 'indigenous to sandy soil.' Isn't that the classic phrase? Hullo —" He broke off and stared.

The scuffling mass had fallen apart and a boy appeared with an air of pride, dragging something by a string over the uneven ground.

"A snake!" Isoël and Doran exclaimed simultaneously.

"Ugh! Beastly." He leaned forward with a white man's instinctive disgust of reptiles.

"How exciting! They must have found it in a market garden and killed it there. One of the drawbacks to Eden." She seemed amused but unmoved by the fact.

"You don't mind them?" Doran wondered.

"Not so much as some things — a black beetle, or a *bat!*" The word was brought out with an effort that testified to her repugnance.

"Isn't that just like a woman?" The man was amused at the contrast. "Two most inoffensive creatures, whereas a snake —"

She interrupted.

"Doesn't flutter about in the dark and get entangled in your hair! Not in England at any rate. Besides that,

in a way, they're fascinating. Yes, I mean it!" She smiled up into his face. "Those big fellows at the Zoo — the way they move, that slow ripple. I could stand and watch them for hours."

"You frighten me!" He turned his head and the gondolier, obeying his gesture, steered them back to the deeper water where the broad channel was marked by posts leaning up against each other like a procession of revellers, too tipsy to cross the mud flats. "I begin to think I'm under the spell of a Lamia and that I shall wake one fine day to see a serpent offering me my breakfast egg!"

Isoël smiled at this. She tucked a cushion under her neck and slipped lower in the boat, drowsy with the heat and silence. For the Spring seemed to have reached its zenith and even the breeze off the sea was warmed by the great gold sun above, as fierce as in an English summer.

"I suppose I'm accustomed to snakes," she murmured.

Doran looked surprised in earnest.

"Why? You've never lived in the East?" Something a little sharp in his voice roused her from her lethargy.

"No. It did sound rather mad. As though I might have kept them as pets!" She gave him a happy smile. "I was thinking of my childhood days. It reminded me of my father."

"Yes?" he prompted very gently. He wondered what was coming now. "Did he tell you tales about them?"

"No, but he had a snake on his arm, tattooed — a real work of art, every tiny scale perfect. It had been done years before, when he was in the Tropics. The head was in the crook of his elbow and then it coiled down to the wrist. I used to beg him to show it me and to clench his fist and make the muscles stand out, when it looked just as if the snake wriggled. My mother thought it horrible, but of course, a child — you understand?" She shrugged her shoulders daintily. "To me it was a lovely game."

Doran nodded. He was glad she could talk in this way, naturally, about the unworthy captain. In time she would tell him everything.

"I can quite fancy how it amused you." He was not going to press her now for any further confidences and mar the harmony of the moment. "You must have been the dearest kid. I wish I'd known you in those days."

A shadow fell across her face. That squalid home in Monaco haunted her at such moments. She felt the sudden dizziness of one who climbs up a ladder and pauses to peer down into the depths. Her mouth drooped and her eyes grew sombre.

Doran saw the changed expression. It moved him with love and pity. He thought she was grieving over her father and changed the subject tactfully.

"I think we've come quite far enough. We shall kill the patient Giovanni if we don't start for home soon." He gave the man the welcome order. "And now I want to talk plans. You told me yesterday you thought of remaining at the *pension* until after I'd seen the Board. But I'm hoping that you'll change your mind. I don't like leaving you in Venice. I believe that war is imminent. Yes, *here*,"—as she glanced at him. "The King didn't go to Quarto nor any of the Government—too busy with the crisis. There's a rumour that the Kaiser has sent a telegram to von Bülow stating that, if Italy moves, a great German army is ready to back up Austria on the frontier. I think this *Lusitania* business has put the cap on the affair. In Milan and other towns they've had Anti-German demonstrations and I want to get you out of the place to avoid the rush of frightened tourists. You'll have to come home with me."

"Oh!" Isoël stared at him. She did not resent his masterful manner but her brain was busy with ways and means. She saw new rocks ahead that threatened her frail bark of adventure.

"Yes." He slid an arm about her, then remembered the man behind them. "Bother Giovanni!" He drew it back. "Why can't he go and row in front?"

Isoël laughed.

"Do you think he cares?"

"*I* do!" said Doran promptly. "Let's get off at the Lido and have tea at the hotel, then take a stroll along the sands."

They decided that this was a thoughtful scheme; it would give the gondolier a rest.

"Now I'll tell you my idea first, then you can start to criticize it. He can't see if I take your hand?"

"I don't know." She was mischievous. "I can feel his eyes like black gimlets boring into the back of my neck."

"Well, lower that parasol behind us. It will do you good to get sunburnt!"

"Thanks!" She turned a mutinous face towards him, refusing the suggestion.

"I'll pay you out later on," Doran threatened. "Just listen, now. I want you to travel home with me on Friday. We'll stay for a day in Paris and look up old haunts. If you're very good you shall choose *the* ring. Isn't that a sufficient bribe? Then we shall have to go to Havre."

"Havre?" She opened her eyes wide.

"Yes. It's a great nuisance. But I promised my sister Mabs to stay with her for a night on my return journey. She's running a canteen there, whilst her husband's in the Dardanelles."

"But she won't want *me*," Isoël faltered. She saw the pitfall under her feet, endless questions and explanations. At all costs this must be avoided.

"Of course she will! You can stay with her. I'll fix that up, all right. She's got a little furnished villa with another woman and I can go to an hotel if there isn't room for both of us. You'll like her. She's a good sort, not a bit like my eldest sister. Honestly, I can't stand Carrie, though her husband's not a bad chap. He's the member for Duncingham, Sir Peter Chivers — no, not the jam! — though I always say so just to rile her. This one at Havre is a Mrs. Strahan — 'Mabs' as all the world calls her. She's a dear and we're great pals. She used to sneak round and see my father — though Carrie never came near us."

Isoël was thinking hard. She remembered Patty and her promise to return to the dingy room they shared, direct from the railway station. But Doran must never know that address. Here was a perilous situation! She asked, in order to gain time:

"How do you get home from Havre?"

He noticed the pronoun and smiled to himself.

"*We* return by Southampton." His mouth had assumed obstinate lines. "I don't come up before the Board until Tuesday at twelve o'clock. This will give us plenty of time. By the way, it seems a ridiculous thing, but I don't know where you live."

Isoël was prepared for this. She laughed but it cost her an effort.

"Nowhere! That's the trouble. You see I've been sharing a little flat with a girl friend all the winter. But she's gone down into the country. So we've let it furnished *pro tem.* I shall have to look out for fresh quarters."

"Well, my dear, it won't be for long." He pressed her hand. It sounded to him a likely story. He was filling up a further gap. Of course she went to live with this girl after Lady Manister's death.

"No, but it makes it rather awkward." Isoël stared blankly ahead. Suddenly inspiration came. "I'll tell you what I'll do," she cried. "I'll travel with you as far as Paris. I should love that — just perfect. No hateful parting here. Then you can go on to Havre and I'll do a little shopping. In case —" She paused with a heightened colour and gave him a shy smile.

"Get your trousseau?" His voice was eager. "You'd be ready then, if there's a rush! But I wanted you to meet Mabs."

"I'd rather not." She was pleading now. "Though of course I'd like to, later on. But she's sure to want you to herself. I should feel distinctly *de trop*. And I'm so shabby. I came out with all my old winter clothes."

"But you'd follow at once if I wired to you?"

"By the next boat."

He nodded his head. He understood that it might be an ordeal for her to be shown to his relations. For love was making him unselfish.

"Well, I give in. Though I feel cheated!"

"You're a darling!" She tipped back the green sunshade, daring the sun, and leaned closer. Doran needed no broader hint.

Behind them the gondolier was smiling benignly. The thin silk of the pretty but cheap parasol proved no obstacle to his view.

Who *wouldn't* kiss the Signorina? He wished he had a chance himself! And the Signore always proved so generous after these excursions. There was no need for a poor man to dwell on grave home expenses. With his last rich English client the only substantial "*buona mano*" beyond his regulation tip had been earned by a tearful recital of a fictitious baby's death and the incidental heavy costs.

Giovanni later had paid for the lie by a night of superstitious terror when his eldest-born went down with fever. He had decided then and there to make an offering to the Saints, but morning light and recovery on the part of the little sufferer had sent the money the usual way, into the nearest lottery. Here, with commendable foresight he chose a number corresponding to the age of his offspring plus the date on which he had married — a trifle late from the recognized moral standpoint.

He placed it to the score of the Saints that the ticket failed to win a prize. The Church was famous for its greed! But it did not debar him from further investment in the great State gamble.

Some day he would make a fortune. Then away to America to double it in that land of gold which is always, in the Italian mind, the half-way house to an old age back in the beloved sunshine, freed from the need of further exertion.

Through the silence, a whistle shrilled. A fussy steamer was churning up the wide passage in their direction packed with a motley crowd of tourists and natives bound for Chioggia.

The sunshade went up with a jerk, the pair beneath it separated discreetly, leaving a space where no handclasp bridged the gulf.

Somewhat self-consciously Doran began to talk:

"I'd forgotten my duties as a guide — I mean, as regards Venice."

Isoël laughed.

"I'm glad to hear you don't set up as a guide to behaviour."

"No." He gave a little chuckle. "Though I did before I met you. It's a case of 'evil communications'!" He waved his hand towards the island, an eye on the approaching boat. "It was a merchant of Malamocca who brought home the body of St. Mark — don't ask me for the date! — it's rather a fascinating story."

"Tell me." She smoothed back a rebellious lock of bright hair.

"He and another adventurer from Torcello fitted out a ship and together they sailed for Alexandria, ostensibly in pursuit of trade. They bribed the men who were in charge of the famous basilica, stole the Saint in the dead of night and hid him away in a cart under a load of salt pork."

"Oh!" Isoël looked shocked.

"Don't you see their Italian cunning? No Mussulman would dare to lay a finger on unclean meat. It was jolly well thought out! They got it on board and set sail and had a miraculous journey home through seas as smooth as a sheet of glass — beyond one trifling contretemps. A boat of unbelievers scoffed and immediately of its own accord the ship of St. Mark bore down and rammed it. He had a short way with sinners!"

Doran paused as the steamer slid past and the gondola, caught in the wash, rocked wildly for a minute.

"I hope you're a good sailor, my dear."

"Go on with the story."

"Well, there isn't much more to tell beyond the wild excitement in Venice. They placed the body for greater safety in one of the pillars of the church. Not then — but later on. I think I'm getting a little mixed! Only a few people knew his exact whereabouts and when they died the secret was lost. No good calling out the Crier! Then in the midst of the city's despair St. Mark solved the problem himself. For the stones opened, revealing the corpse, snug in the middle of his pillar! He's supposed to lie in state since under the High Altar, but I've often wondered what happened to him when the church was burnt down completely at the end of the tenth century."

"The fire wouldn't touch him," said Isoël gravely.

Doran suppressed an incredulous smile. He respected her faith.

"You're probably right."

"I wish I knew a quarter as much as you do about Venice. I love all these wonderful stories."

"I won't swear that they're all authentic," Doran reminded her. "I picked up most of them from my father. He used to tell me them as a boy when I played about the studio."

"You *must* miss him," she said softly.

Doran nodded. After a little he let her into his private thoughts.

"If only one knew — if I were sure some part of him 'carried on,' and above all, that he was happy."

"But of course he is!" Her voice was low. "A fine man — he has his reward."

The note of belief comforted him. He gave her a grateful glance.

"It seems simple then to you?"

"Not always," she conceded. Then she smiled with tender lips. "A God who could paint this sky and sea would be sure to safeguard his artists."

"Bless you!" The pretty thought touched Doran's imagination. "It's what the old man always said. He believed that Beauty was indestructible — that it went on in a higher form, with all great effort and honest work; that nothing was lost, no germ of Truth."

A little silence fell between them, intimate and filled, to him, with memories of the dead man. But Isoël's mind moved ahead. She was faced with another difficulty. How could she get her precious *dot* safely conveyed to her at Paris? She needed it for her trousseau — that old dream realized! It had been placed in the Savings Bank at a post office in Soho. Anywhere else, she said to herself, it would have been easy to ask Doran to take the matter in hand for her. But now she must turn again to Patty. Then she remembered that her friend was off on a week's holiday. For a letter had reached her overnight announcing a visit to Southend.

"Isn't it fun?"— the girl had written —"I'm going to board with Bert's aunt and he's coming down for the week-end. Hope there won't be Zepps about! Though Bert says there's a fine cellar. Perhaps it would bring him to the point? You can picture me among the coals being proposed to, can't you, ducky?

I didn't expect to get away till Easter but they're repainting our rooms at the Stores and we're now in the Hairdressing department. Very crowded — and stuffy too! So they're letting us all off in turn and mine came first — good biz! I shall return with Bert on Monday. A lucky thing I've a new frock."

So Patty would not be back in time and who else could she trust to draw out the precious money and place it to her credit at Cook's?

Sir Abel Groot?

Would he do it? There was no harm in asking him and to make the matter doubly certain she would enclose her Post Office book. For she shrank from the thought that the crafty old man should mistrust her statement concerning her *dot* and imagine that she craved a loan. He should see the balance was there intact.

Doran broke in on her scheme. They had reached the landing-stage at the Lido.

"It's a bit too early for tea yet. Shall we take the tram across and have a look at the open sea?"

She agreed, and leaving the gondola, they settled themselves in that stuffy conveyance, deserted at this hour of siesta save for a swarthy yawning conductor.

"This awakens memories. Weren't you cross with me that night? But I've had my revenge," Doran laughed. He was in a very happy mood.

It was good to feel that those days of doubt were passed, that they faced life together on a new basis of confidence. The girl looked at him curiously.

"But *then,* it was a different matter. You wouldn't have expected me to be anything else but cross, would you?"

"No, darling." His face grew serious. "I think what I love best about you is — oh, well, I can't explain." He gave her a nervous glance. "Women are not *always* straight."

She forced a smile but a sharp pain stabbed her heart, unexpectedly.

Straight? Was she straight with him? Then she gave herself a shake. How silly she was to let regret mar the joy of this perfect hour. And once married she would be safe. She threw off the touch of depression.

"I'll confess to you. I was jealous!" But she

laughed on the word airily. "Yes — those gloves. I suspected a rival. And I wasn't far wrong, was I?"

"Jealous of Tory? Good Lord! That's the limit." He meant it too. "She's all right as an old friend, but she's not a patch on — my wife!"

"Ah, don't!" She crossed herself. "It's not lucky to call me that. Not yet!"

He smiled at this outburst.

"We'll soon be able to laugh at Fate! D. V. and the powers permitting, you've only a week or so of freedom to indulge in your criminal tendency to flirt with Phipps and American 'beaux.' What do you want for a wedding present?"

"Oh!" Her face lit up.

"I rather thought"— he was feeling his way —"that since you're to be a war-bride we'd take the fashionable course."

"And omit it?" She laughed back.

"No. I meant I'd give you a cheque. It's what every one's doing now." For he thought she might be short of money.

"I shouldn't accept it!" Her cheeks flamed.

"My dear child, don't be vexed. It's much more practical in war-time." His voice sounded obstinate.

"Then I don't want anything," she cried.

He saw that her pride was touched.

"Well, perhaps we'll find something in Paris. I'd like you to choose it anyhow. It's fine to think you're coming with me. What will they say at the Cats' Home?"

"Another elopement!" She smiled, relieved. He had given in to her desires and it filled her with new confidence; for she knew the strength of his will.

They got out of the hot tram and made their way past the last building and the scattered groups of idle people sunning themselves by the shore.

On they went perseveringly until they reached an open stretch of shining sand, where the shells glistened and they had their Eden to themselves.

Her spirits rose in proportion to the sense of open space and sea.

"I'll race you to that second stake!" She dared him

like a mischievous child. "The prize shall be the largest shell."

Without waiting for his response she was off swift and light as a bird. Then in the midst of her first flight she stopped as though a stone had struck her, turned slowly, her face changed, and came fluttering back to him.

"Oh, my dear!" Her lips quivered. "Forgive me — I didn't think. You *mustn't* run! I'm *so* sorry."

He held out his arms to her.

"Silly child! It doesn't matter." Divining her trouble, he spoke lightly.

"Yes, it does." She gave a sob. "It's such a shame! But I'll make you well. I'll wait upon you hand and foot and nurse you until —" She could say no more.

For Doran had swung her off her feet in a mighty hug that bespoke his strength. Then he put her down again, a wicked twinkle in his eyes.

"Nurse *me?* Not if I know it!" He settled himself on the sandy ridge and took her deliberately on his knee. "That's better, isn't it? Thank God we've got rid of Giovanni!"

CHAPTER XXIII

"I'M not given to sentiment,"—Judy sat by the open window on a low stool, hugging her knees and pronounced this statement thoughtfully—"but I'm blest if I like your going away! Everything seems to have come together." She puffed out her cheeks dolefully.

Isoël looked up from the floor where she knelt before her heaped-up trunk, adding a few remaining trifles by the aid of a smoky lamp.

"You won't miss me half so much as I shall miss you, *mon cher*. I wish you were coming home with us."

"No such luck," Judy grunted. "Lord! How I long to be back in England." She struck her leg with a clenched fist. "There's work to be done that makes me break the last commandment at every turn. And here I am, lazing about in gondolas and prattling to cats who think that a scarf with a ball fringe is all the nation requires of them! One of those old rips downstairs has worked her initials into a helmet to show the 'poor dear men' at the Front that 'somebody is thinking of them'!"

Isoël laughed.

"How touching!" She glanced at the trim compact figure of this woman she had learnt to love. "I can guess you'd find plenty of work to suit you. If you went back, what would you do?"

"I think I'd take up carpentering. I'm pretty useful in that line. Start a workshop and teach girls to take men's places by and by. But what's the use of imagining things that can't be?" Her voice was hopeless. "There's Bella, you see. I can't leave her, and England's too cold at present. It's always been Bella. I don't grudge it—poor old girl! But there you are. I suppose it's what the 'unco guid' would call my 'work in the world'—or some other rot like that! But I'm not built for a 'lady companion' with all the Christian virtues thrown in: a taste for arranging bowls of flowers—and a rooted objection to dusting china! I'd far

sooner sweep the stairs. I like a thoroughly active life and to mix "— she smiled —" with my fellow-men."

"I think you're a perfect saint to stand it."

Judy caught her up with a frown.

"You're wrong there. I'm fond of Bella and I couldn't rub along without her. If only I got more time to myself. The trouble is I can't afford a decent home and a trained nurse to relieve me from the constant attention. I should always want Bella with me. We've stuck together through thick and thin. But if I could take up an outside job and spend my leisure time with her it would be such a relief to my temper. She's not exactly an invalid but she's always on the verge of it. I've been so worried about her to-day. She had a nasty fainting fit and the doctor here is a perfect ass. I warned him beforehand that she was nervous and he went and told her her heart was weak! *Just* what I didn't want her to know."

"How annoying." Isoël nodded.

"Well, it's done. Poor old Bella is feeling her pulse every hour. She's not exactly unhappy about it, rather triumphant. She said to me: 'There, Judy, I've always told you there was something radically wrong.' And she's fished up an ancient relation who died from *angina pectoris,* and says it's in the family! It's rather a comfort to her perhaps that it's such a respectable complaint." Judy chuckled as she added, "And not the result of youthful excesses." The smoky lamp caught her eye and she crossed the room to lower the wick. "Let's have old Flinders up and ask her to inhale this stink. I'll bet you it's short of oil."

"She'd only invent some pathetic excuse."

"Yes, she's gifted in that line. The last time I complained of my boots she explained with a modest blush that Giuseppe's wife had had twins. When I told her that I couldn't connect the two industries, she fled." Judy gave a delighted bark. "I do love to shock the Flinders! But she gets her revenge in the bill. Shall I turn out this brute and trim it, or can you get along with candles?"

"Wait *one* second and then I've done. There!" Isoël closed the box.

Judy seized the unruly lamp.

"I've got an idea! We'll place this on the little table near number six." This was Mrs. Percival's room. "And let it smoke itself to death. There'll be a holy row directly when the lady comes up to bed." She went off with a chuckle.

Isoël lit the pair of candles and started to pack her dressing-bag. The sight of the worn fittings reminded her of her first meeting with Judy in the train and of her own unnecessary falsehood concerning Lady Manister.

"I don't suppose she remembered the name five minutes after," she said to herself reassuringly. Nevertheless as she heard the door reopen to admit the practical joker, she closed the bag rather quickly, unwilling to rouse old memories.

"It's smoking like a factory chimney," Judy announced with a grin. "Now, what can I do to help?"

"Nothing. I've finished for to-night. So let's have a last gossip." She pushed the arm-chair towards her friend and sat down on the bed. "I went round after lunch to say good-bye to the Van Degans but he was out and his sister was not well enough to see me."

"No. The child's all to bits. I learnt to-day that the young man who was drowned in the *Lusitania* was rather more than a mere friend." Judy's face was serious now. "He was to have travelled over with her but was delayed at the last moment. Rough luck on both of them! It's hit America pretty hard, this last piece of foul play. They'll know what the Canadians felt when they found their men crucified. Oh, this war! It's a bad business. I don't mean the clean slaughter so much as the needless cruelty, the maiming of non-combatants. V.D. believes that his country will take strong action at this crisis. I hope so with all my heart. I'm fond of Americans. I've had some good friends among them and I'd like to see them enforce respect from the other nations looking on.

"They're pouring out their money freely in Red Cross work and relief funds and, what's better, in energy. The French know this better than we do. Our eyes are on Washington alone. Nedda talks of going to Paris to join the host of American women working like Trojans

over there. I should think it would do her a lot of good. She's frivolous on the surface, but there's sound grit underneath. It only needed some stimulus to bring out the best in her. But the point is: is she strong enough? I've talked it over with V.D. and he leaves the verdict in my hands. It's a pretty big responsibility. He's worried to death about it himself."

"I don't see why he should worry *you!* You've got your own burdens to bear." Isoël was plainly indignant. "After all, he's her brother."

"Yes, but I'm his oldest friend," Judy loyally retorted.

"I wish I could do something to help." Isoël slid down from the bed and perched herself on the arm of the chair in which Judy was ensconced.

"You can't, my infant. Your course is plain. You're out to make a tyrant of Francis!" She caught the girl round the waist and drew her squarely on to her lap, a move intended to mitigate the severity of the coming lecture. "Now — I'm going to talk to you! Don't you go spoiling him. I've seen many a happy marriage crocked up in this way. It doesn't do to give in to a man. They don't respect you in the end. You've got to live your life with him and not only the honeymoon. Francis once told me himself that what he admired in your character was its independence. The words he used were you 'held reserves' — your wares not all in the front window! I'd like you to remember this. I believe that the real drawback to marriage is that men feel they've bought the lot. There's nothing further in the future. It's all very well to love a man but don't show it too plainly or let him have his own way at the loss of personal dignity."

Isoël was struggling up, vexed by this open speech, but Judy held her in a vice.

"That's better," she said with a chuckle. "You've caught my intention nicely."

"*Judy!* You're a beast!" Isoël's dark eyes were flaming.

"No, I'm not. I'm a damned good friend." She stooped and pecked the hot cheeks shamefacedly — a rare caress.

The girl's anger evaporated. She had had so little true affection offered to her in her lonely life that Judy's concession — as, rightly, she judged it — touched her rebellious heart.

"I believe you are!" She slipped an arm round the neck in the stiff collar and gave her friend a sudden hug. "And you've been *such* a dear to me! I was utterly wretched when you came here and you've smoothed my way — to everything."

"Then take my warning to heart, old chap. I mean it, every word. And I shouldn't advise the Flinders like this. I should pitch her into a man's arms and thank my stars if he held her! But you're worth a bit of trouble — and the chance of getting my face smacked. You can do it now if it's any relief!" Her jolly laugh pealed forth.

To her surprise she felt instead soft lips pressed to her cheek. For a moment she lingered under the spell of this spontaneous warm caress. Then she whipped up the slim figure and laid her down on the bed.

"That's the proper place for you. You've got a long journey to-morrow. And I must tuck old Bella up. See you early. So long!" The door slammed after her.

Isoël listened to her step dying away down the passage. With her head deep in the soft pillow she yielded to her weariness for a brief spell of idle dreaming.

Had she been too lax with Doran? She pressed her hands to her hot face. The memory of the scenes at the Lido — that earlier one in which she had gained his grudging respect and their visit later — rose up accusingly.

Did men think more lightly of girls who responded freely to their love? What a puzzle life was; full of warring sentiments.

A sudden vision of her mother swept before her. Here was one who had given all recklessly and reaped in return a barren neglect.

A cold shiver ran through the girl. How could her father have gone away, loving her mother, respecting her? Had Miriam been over-generous, too much his devoted slave?

She tried to recall her father's face. It was blurred

across the vista of years. Only a shadowy outline remained; the short fair beard and blue eyes, lined beneath but full of sparkle. For Dark had kept his good looks to a certain degree up to the last, and his evil genius had tended to make him not morose but genial and free in those hours when he succumbed to his weakness.

Isoël had been too young to realize his degradation. She had never seen her father drunk. For Miriam was a careful mother. On many a night had the little child been sent unusually early to bed in her small attic under the roof and always the morning after received the same thoughtful admonition.

"*La petite* must be *sage* to-day. The poor father has his headache."

And the "poor father" avoided her, whipped by the drunkard's fitful remorse.

She had not even mastered the facts concerning the man's public disgrace. She knew that he had left the Navy under a cloud but, beyond this, Miriam had screened the child from more damning disclosures. And as the years rolled on Romance had gilded the memories. Miriam had held him up more as a pattern than a warning!

Isoël must remember her "birth," that her father had been a "gentleman"!

So, though Truth had been denied her, a certain proper pride was bred in the young girl by the knowledge of a mysterious heritage. She must always behave as her "father's daughter."

It saved her from the common infection of whispering playmates at her school and later from the confidences of work-girls in a lower class.

She was not blind to intrigue, but she disdained it openly. Let them flirt and play with men and go to their "hops" and picture-shows! It was not meet for Isoël Dark. Higher things were reserved for her. So out of evil had sprung good. Pride had screened her from temptation.

Now, again, she must remember; check back the flood of love that the presence of Doran woke in her heart. For she had come so fresh to passion, and in her blood was the Southern curse and blessing combined — that

lack of proportion where *l'amore* claims its victims — that there were moments when her reason was swept aside like a straw on the perilous wave of emotion.

She must remember who she was. Not only Clotilde's *mannequin* who had succeeded in her ambition but the daughter of Gervase Dark.

Full of this grave resolution and unaware of the paradox — that the daughter of a social outcast should lean on her father for moral support — she rose and went to the open window, then turned to blow out the candles which dimmed the beauty of the night.

She stepped down on her balcony and gazed at the dark line of water stealing through the white bridges to join the ripple of the lagoon. The moon was shadowed by drifting clouds but beyond these the stars were clear in the deep blue of the heavens. Everywhere was the sense of silence.

Yet something was brooding beyond the peace. Overstrung and sensitive from a week of piled-up emotions, the girl shivered. Was it war?

Would this perfect fairy scene witness the horrors of modern strife and share in the Armageddon?

The whole world was going mad. What was to be the end of it? She stood there with tears in her eyes.

Then, as if a friend afar had caught her wireless message for help, a musical voice rose out of the night, rich and throbbing, alive with passion.

It trolled forth carelessly an old sonorous fragment of opera:

"La don-na è mo-bile . . ."

Some festive, wandering Rigoletto!

Isoël smiled, her head thrown back, drinking in the man's strong notes that brought such a glowing human touch to the cold picture in the moonlight. The singer was hidden from her sight but the words reached her, clear and gay.

"Mobile," — there it was! A new weapon of defence. Doran should find that his lady's moods were not all of sweet submission. A dimple stole out near her mouth, she felt a faint revival of mischief.

But when she closed the window at last and relit the

pair of candles, she studied her face in the glass with a fugitive trace of anxiety.

The dark eyes looked back gravely, purely into her own, but violet shadows lay beneath them and the fresh young mouth held a hint of pain.

For she had passed through the crisis that every generous woman knows: to measure her splendid gift of love by the price she set upon her honour.

CHAPTER XXIV

PARIS seemed greatly changed to Doran, who had passed through it, without stopping, on his way to Italy, but on Isoël the fine streets, the light, exhilarating air and, above all, her mother's tongue, acted like magic from the first.

She had slept well in the train, rejoicing in her *wagon-lit* and the absence of an occupant of the second berth, unaware that Doran had made this a certainty by securing both at the outset. It gave them privacy in the daytime and they had passed long hours together watching the swift panorama and discussing plans for the days ahead.

Now, as they sat side by side, with the luggage piled against their knees and Doran pointed out to her the various features of the city, Isoël felt again the thrill of this wonderful adventure. Paris — the second magical name — caught up like a fallen pearl on the thread of her wanderings, and exquisite in the early light.

They crossed the big boulevards and came at last to the long arcade of shops in the Rue de Rivoli, where women were taking down the shutters, or sweeping the pavements busily, and sprinkling them with handfuls of water, passed the Louvre and the Tuileries gardens and on into the great white Place de la Concorde where the statue of *Strasbourg* marked the heights of the nation's pain in the past and infinite hope for the future.

Doran told Isoël how, in the first exhilarating advance of the French army in Alsace, the patriots had torn down the mourning wreaths of faced beads and wrapped about the carved figure the sacred folds of the Tricolour.

Down the wide Champs-Elysées motors already were skimming fast filled with staff-officers and busy dark-browed officials; ambulance waggons moved slowly and a squad of *pioupious* swung past in the new delicate *bleu céleste*, chosen, so the soldier explained, for its vanishing qualities in the dark.

These were the only youthful men she saw in the whole of their long drive from the Gare de l'Est to the little hotel recommended to her by Judy. For Paris, recovering fast from the scare of a second siege at the hands of the now checked host of barbarians sweeping across from the North, seemed to be held in trust by women and a few grey-haired veterans, who had taken over all forms of work, even to watering the streets.

Wide-eyed, Isoël watched members of her own sex, with skirts trussed up over heavy boots, skilfully manipulating the long hose run on wheels and regulating the flood of water in and out of the passing traffic. Here was none of the coquetry of the girls at home attempting war-work, fussy about their uniforms and the vexed question of breeches or skirts. The women worked bare-headed for the most part, in the old frocks which had served them in private life, and down the pavements unceasingly came the long stream of widows and mothers garbed in crape, mourning their dead yet taking up their men's burdens.

It seemed pitiful in the sunshine, with the trees bursting into leaf, and the spicy sweetness of the breeze as it sang past the white buildings of the coming of the spring; yet, through it all, ran the spiritual note of a resurrection. France had risen again from the grave of much that was undermining her moral, a nation at one in the face of danger, and her great heart throbbed to the note of battle.

A little group of wounded men came hobbling into the Rond Point. A flower-girl, fresh from the markets, paused to exchange a cheery greeting and broke off a bright blossom from her loaded basket offering it to the foremost of the party.

They could not hear what she said but they saw her laugh and pass on. No coin had changed hands though her daily bread depended on it.

"She gave it him," said Isoël softly as they turned up a narrow street. "I see now why they call this place the Elysian Fields." Her eyes were shining. "I've fallen in love with Paris already! I'm so glad I'm staying here. Only I wish you could be with me."

"So do I." He looked rueful. "Never mind! We'll

come back together at the first chance. It's a good old place! I love it too."

They drew up at the little hotel. A woman porter answered the door. Isoël had engaged her room and she went up to inspect it. The windows looked down into a court opening out of the busy kitchen and here again were women at work, the masculine element replaced.

"Aren't they splendid?" she said to herself. "We talk about our 'sacrifices' but we don't know yet what it really means when a whole nation goes to war."

Doran had proclaimed his intention of having a bath in the hotel and Isoël was glad to change out of her dusty travelling clothes. They met downstairs, an hour later, and explored the quaint little place, bare but scrupulously clean, presided over by Madame Bon who had given the pair a hearty welcome and, as Judy said, "lived up to her name."

"How nice you look!" His grey eyes ran over the girl admiringly. "Now, where would you like to go to lunch? Some smart place, I suppose."

"Where do you want to go yourself?" She had caught the doubtful intonation of his voice in the latter phrase. "Haven't you any favourite haunt?"

"Well, I have. But what about you? It's an artist's place across the river where I used to go with my old Dad." He looked at her dubiously.

"Do you think me such a Philistine?" She laughed gaily. His face cleared.

"The food used to be pretty good but I don't know what it's like in war-time. Will you risk it?"

"*Bien sûr!*"

"And I'll take you to Noël Peter's for dinner. *Si ça vous plait, mademoiselle.* How do you like my Parisian accent?"

"It's shocking!" She spoke teasingly. "It gave me a shiver down my spine to hear you tell the man at the *douane* that you had '*ri-ang à déclairer*'!"

Doran grinned.

"Well, come in here and give me a lesson before we start." He backed into the reading-room, a dark little hole and empty of guests.

But Isoël saw through the manœuvre.

"I'll teach you as we go along. It's easier in the open air." Her pretty face was mischievous.

"We haven't many hours together," he warned her and she relented.

But he only snatched the briefest kiss before she escaped. He felt aggrieved. It strengthened his determination to hurry her into an early marriage. She listened demurely to his reasons for this step as they rattled along towards the Rue de la Paix where Doran "thought" they might find a shop with some "decent rings"—an estimate quickly justified.

They entered a famous portal with the air of two conspirators and were greeted by an elderly man with a white "imperial" and courtly manners.

He apologized for the empty cases lining the elaborate walls. They had just reopened their Paris branch, having removed most of their treasures during the scare to their *maison* at Havre.

"If Monsieur will give me a moment's grace, I will see what we hold in the safe." He divined a wealthy customer and added, with flattering nonchalance, "The rings in the window do not count. They are *pour tout le monde!*"

In the end they chose a square emerald set round with rows of brilliants. It reminded the girl of the little clasp on Doran's first gift to her.

She was a trifle awed by the size and beauty of the new jewel. The courtly Frenchman disappeared with a smiling excuse and gave the lover the chance he wanted, to slip the ring on to the slim finger.

"There—Now you're really mine!" He laughed, but his eyes were tender.

"It's too lovely!" She bent her head and kissed the stone with childish delight. "I wish—" She peeped through the door into the room behind and saw the proprietor returning. "That must keep," she said demurely.

Doran was in a generous mood. He turned to the man.

"I should like to see something else. To wear round the neck," he added vaguely.

"*Mais oui, Monsieur.* Madame perhaps has already pearls? If not—" He was off, smiling and rubbing his hands.

"You've gone up a step." Doran chuckled as he saw Isoël's look of wonder. "He takes you now for my wife — minus a wedding-ring!"

"A courtesy you've already paid for." She laughed back enjoying the fun. "I really ought to drag you away before any further extravagance."

"No, you don't! I'm out to squander. I think I'll explain that you're my aunt — my maiden aunt. What's the French for it?"

"I shan't tell you!" She sobered down. "Do be good! He'll think us mad.'"

But Doran, incorrigible, stooped and whispered in her ear.

"Heavens, no!" She had to laugh. "'*Marraine*' means 'godmother,' and the other word is — *impossible!*"

"Sounds all right to me," said the soldier.

They examined the little velvet tray on which were spread three rows of pearls, two in graduated sizes and the third even and perfectly matched.

Isoël held them up to her throat and peered in the ornate mirror.

"I think I like the last one best."

The jeweller smiled.

"Madame has reason. Those — they are *pas trop mal,* but these now —" He retrieved the necklace. "Here are pearls with a history! A client of ours instructs us to sell, a well-known countess and connoisseur. They were picked up one by one, not so much for size but colour and for their perfect shape. Monsieur will secure a bargain; our client sells them at a loss. *Mais, que voulez-vous? C'est la guerre!*" He shrugged his thin pointed shoulders.

Doran examined the string himself.

"You like them?" he asked his fiancée.

"I should think I do! But I'm quite sure they'll prove more than you ought to give.'

"Well, we'll see about that. You go outside and look at the window whilst we discuss business."

He drove her, laughing, from the shop and returned to go into figures.

After a little argument the jeweller wrote out a guarantee and Doran gave him a draft on Cook's.

"You'd better send round and cash it now, or ring them up. We can wait. Madame will like to wear them away and I'm only in Paris until to-night."

He went out to Isoël with a solemn face.

"Too expensive. Sorry, old lady."

"It doesn't matter." She managed to smile. "I don't want them. I've got my ring — my lovely ring."

"What a little sportsman you are!" He explained his mischievous deception.

Her gratitude was pretty to see. Then with flushed cheeks and shining eyes she drew him to the broad window.

"I want to give you a present too. Some little thing. What would you like?" She looked up at him wistfully. He guessed that she felt her poverty; she could not make him a fitting return.

"I don't want anything — but yourself!"

"Oh, yes!" He saw that he must be careful not to wound her sensitive pride. "I've been looking at a pair of links. I thought it rather a nice idea, *Those* —" She pointed them out to him.

Doran was seized with a happy thought.

"By Jove, I forgot! One minute." He went back into the shop.

She could see him over the velvet curtain that screened the space behind the glass sacred to the trays of jewels, talking quickly across the counter. Then he returned to her side.

"Awfully rude of me to bolt. It was something about the cheque. Now let's look. Are those they? Well, I'd rather have the set next to them — those plain ones. Yes, honestly, I mean it. But don't go throwing your money away. Find out the damage first. I'll have a cigarette."

She went in nervously. To her surprise and relief the figure was most moderate, quite within the reach of her purse. She never knew that the price quoted was only

a third of the actual cost, the rest added by arrangement to her generous lover's bill.

The jeweller tactfully explained that in these days of a dearth of men there was not much demand for links and that he was glad to reduce the stock.

Doran avoided the man's eye as he solemnly wrapped up the present. Later the beautiful string of pearls was fastened round the girl's throat and they went out into the sunshine as happy as youth and love could make them.

"That's part of my wedding present," he explained as they walked down into the Place Vendôme. "You'd better wear them day and night. Don't go leaving them about. Besides it improves the colour. In Italy the great ladies lend their pearls to their foster sisters to wear whilst working at the vintage. The sunshine and their healthy skins bring back the old lustre."

"How curious." Her voice was absent. She had paused to gaze at a hat-shop.

Doran followed her glance and smiled.

"That's rather jolly — that big black one. Come along in and I'll give it you."

"No. You're getting too reckless. Isn't it nearly time for lunch?" She turned his thoughts in another direction.

"Hungry? So am I. I've just realized the fact." He beckoned to a passing taxi. "Jump in." He directed the man.

They drove across the shining Seine and along the quays for a short distance then up a narrow street until they came to the restaurant. One new and strange feature of Paris that had struck Doran on his arrival was the fact that the cafés instead of spreading out across the pavement had shrunk back into their shells, like a snail in rough weather.

No longer were the outside tables and chairs monopolized by all classes, drinking their "bock" or their absinthe and watching the stream of passers-by. Here and there a solitary old man or a pair of women sought a brief moment of rest over a modest cup of coffee, but the Boulevard habit was broken through, the life of the streets completely altered.

Outside the *Nain Noir* a couple of American artists were gathered forlornly over their drinks and a waiter hovered in the doorway, a frail old figure, past his prime.

As the taxi stopped, he came forward, a soiled napkin over his arm.

"*Monsieur désire?*" He raised a pair of eyes, surprisingly blue, but watery above pouches of loose skin denoting ill-health.

Doran asked for the *patron*. The waiter threw out his hands. Monsieur had not heard then? The good Monsieur Jolivard was dead. Three months since — a great loss. But his wife carried on the business.

Would Monsieur come this way? He would find Madame at the desk.

They followed him into the restaurant, a little sobered by the news, and found the good lady enthroned on a high stool in the little box which suggested a pulpit, the big ledger taking the place of the Bible.

"*Tiens! C'est Monsieur Doran.*" She slid down, surprisingly agile, and forced her way through the narrow door, her fat face wreathed in smiles.

Doran held out his hand.

"*Ça marche toujours?*" But his voice grew grave as he added a word of sympathy.

"*Mais oui, Monsieur!* One does what one can!" She shrugged her shoulders with simple courage. "My brave Jacques — gone — like that! But with little suffering, *Dieu merci!* It was the shock that finished him. First his brother and then Pierre — our youngest-born. This war takes all. But they died *pour la patrie.*" Her head went up. "One would not wish it otherwise."

Doran was moved by her fortitude.

"They learn to be brave from their mothers."

She smiled and left the remark unchallenged.

"Monsieur, too, has had his griefs? One heard of it in the *Quartier*. Monsieur has my sincere regrets."

She glanced sideways at Isqël. Doran introduced the girl, adding proudly, "*Ma fiancée.*"

"*La, la, la!*" Madame beamed. "It is as it should be — the dark and the fair. And a wife is a sure refuge in trouble. Monsieur is wise. He would like his old table?"

Doran laughed.

"*Quelle mémoire!*"

She tapped her forehead, heavily powdered, under its crown of sleek black hair — too black for her years — and gave him a coquettish glance.

"One keeps it here — for the good clients. Monsieur is not to be forgotten." Then led the way to a quiet corner with a window open upon the street.

"What are you going to give us to eat?" Doran picked up the menu.

The *patronne* willingly guided his choice.

An omelet *aux fines herbes* followed by the *plat du jour,* a *ragoût* — she could recommend it — and then a dish of *petits pois* — almost the first, small but sweet — a cream cheese that came from a farm beyond Courbevoie, kept by her sister — and *café double* — she would see to that.

"Excellent," Doran decided after consulting Isoël. "Now, what shall we drink?"

La mère Jolivard glanced round for the wine-card.

"Where is that Gustave? *Bon Dieu!* The trouble one has to find a waiter at all in these days. And this one there is nothing more than an *imbécile!*"

But at last everything was settled. The stout black-robed figure retired to sit at the receipt of custom. They watched her force her massive hips sideways into the cramped space. It was an uncommonly tight fit.

Doran caught Isoël's eye and winked.

"But such a good soul! The stand-by of needy artists in the *quartier,* so my father told me. I'm glad we came here to-day. I only hope it won't bore you?"

"No, I love it. It's so homely. A place I could come to by myself. I shall make friends with Madame Jolivard and wander back when I feel lonesome."

The tables were slowly filling up with habitués, mostly artists, elderly men, with here and there a *commerçant,* or a lawyer, black portfolio under his arm. They all looked grave and distrait. There was none of the student element. Gustave was immensely busy, assisted by a squat youth in a full man's suit, accordion-pleated about his legs and bony arms.

Doran tried to attract the waiter and hurry him up

with the wine, but the frail old figure was very flurried.

"He's a funny-looking old chap, isn't he?" said the soldier. "I should say he'd seen better days. Something about the cut of his head."

Isoël idly followed his glance. Gustave was framed against the light that poured in through the broad windows. The profile was almost aristocratic with its finely modelled Roman nose and straight brow which warred with the loose and tremulous old mouth beneath and the clean-shaven weak chin. The man had long nervous hands, small boned and refined, though coarsened by hard work and constant dipping in greasy water.

"Yes, he's above the usual class. He looks ill, poor old thing, as if his legs would give way. See, he can hardly carry that tray."

Her voice was very pitiful as Gustave passed, staggering under a pile of plates and dishes.

Doran checked him, repeating his order.

"Oui, Monsieur, *tout de suite!*" His eyes lingered on the girl and the sympathy in her pretty face.

"Don't hurry him," she whispered. "I'm not a bit thirsty, really. Why!" she gazed, a little surprised after the shuffling figure. "He knows English — I'm sure he does! He looked so grateful for a moment."

"That carries out my theory. He's had a decent education."

The talk drifted to other subjects. They arranged that the soldier should wire at once after the verdict of the Board, and that Isoël should then decide the day of her departure from Paris.

"Where shall you stay when you get to town?" Doran asked. "Have you any plans?"

"Yes. I shall go to an hotel. I rather thought of the *Russell.*"

For, many a time, in her long walks round her old neighbourhood, had the big building attracted her and this would be quite close to Patty and facilitate her arrangements. She would keep her promise if possible and slip across for the first night to that bare but familiar room for a gossip with her old comrade.

"It's rather out of the way," said Doran.

"It's not far from my church, Our Lady of France," she said quickly.

"Is that in Soho?"

"Yes." She coloured. "It's French, you see."

Doran nodded.

"And you'd like to be married there?"

She thought swiftly for a moment. Was this a wise move? Then she remembered that the priest who knew her family history had been moved to another parish. She smiled at Doran.

"Yes, I should. But I'm not really particular. It's just as you like."

"I'll see to it."

The waiter came back with the wine and the second course. He hovered round Isoël with marked attention. Doran observed it and chaffed her.

"You've made a conquest. He can't keep his eyes off you! I don't wonder." He raised his glass and drank a silent toast to her. "After this we'll have a drive in the Bois, then home to tea and a little rest before dinner. How does that arrangement suit you?"

She left it happily in his hands and they carried it out in due course.

Skirting the river they bowled along and crossed the bridge at Mendon, winding about until they came to the Cascade, where they found the busy restaurant shut up, another sign of the times.

In the long Allée des Acacias they only passed a single carriage, but by the lake were waggonettes crowded with wounded soldiers enjoying the warm afternoon and the tender green of the young leaves.

The broad shining sheet of water delighted Isoël and she tried to follow Doran's description of the scene prior to the war; the lines of carriages and *fiacres* filled with smartly dressed people, the tan rides gay with horsemen, and here and there a wedding cortège, the bride radiant beneath her veil and the *jeune marlé* stiff and proud in evening dress, like a strayed waiter.

The only familiar feature remaining to the Avenue du Bois was the presence of innumerable children, often, alas, garbed in black, and the *nou nous* with their white

caps and floating ribbons in bright tartan. Here and there a withered old woman was selling balloons or plying her trade in *gaufres*, the children dragged reluctantly past the little wheel by their stern guardians.

But over it all hung the cloud of war. Paris, no longer the fine lady, had settled grimly down to work.

They carried out their earlier programme; dined at the pleasant restaurant in the quiet Passage des Princes, walked along the Boulevards as far as the Madeleine, ghostly amidst the darkened streets and picked up a battered *fiacre* which set them down at their hotel. Doran had persuaded the girl to relinquish her project of seeing him off. He had a man's intimate horror of farewells at a railway station. As they passed the *bureau* he paused for a word with Madame Bon, always ready for a gossip.

"*Voici une lettre pour Mademoiselle.*" She produced from the evening's *courrier* a square envelope directed in Sir Abel Groot's hand. "A pity that Monsieur is not staying."

"We will come again," Doran assured her. "Is Mademoiselle allowed in the *fumoir?*" He guessed they would have it to themselves.

"But of course! Monsieur desires a cab — at what hour?"

He gave the directions and they passed on to the little room at the back of the *Salle-à-manger* which had an unused air. For most of the clientele now consisted of elderly ladies, nurses and children.

"This is fine." He glanced round him and pulled two rocking-chairs side by side. "Read your letter and then we'll talk." For he saw she was studying the address.

She was wondering if Sir Abel Groot had forwarded the precious money, a little anxious on the point.

Doran picked up a paper off the nearest table and started to read. Then, as the girl drew out the enclosure, something slipped from the folded page and fluttered down to his feet. He stooped and reclaimed it. It was a cheque for a hundred pounds made out to "Miss Isoël Dark" and signed clearly "Abel Groot.'

He held it out to her silently, a growing wonder in his heart.

"Thanks." She glanced at it and smiled but offered no explanation. It did not occur to her that her lover might be curious. She was too relieved to find herself in funds again, fully prepared to launch forth on her trousseau.

"You'd better not leave that about." Doran's voice was purposely careless.

"No." She slipped the cheque in the letter and put both, with a little laugh, down the opening of her blouse. "That's safe." Her cheeks were warm with a touch of excitement as she thought of the precious *dot* fulfilling the purpose of her dreams. She would not disgrace him by shabby clothes. "I shall buy that black hat," she thought. "The one he admired in the window." Then she glanced up at him, conscious of his steady silence.

"There's something I want to say." He fidgeted, plainly embarrassed.

"Well?" She slipped a hand into his, smiling. "Out with it, *mon vieux*."

"You're all right about funds?" he asked, rather jerkily, adding, "I mean, it's not so easy to cash cheques in Paris now." All the time at the back of his head rang that odd name, "Abel Groot,." It seemed in some way familiar.

Could he be the girl's trustee, under Lady Manister's will? His face cleared at the thought.

As she did not answer at once he went on more happily.

"I wish you'd let me be your banker, *pro tem*. You can pay me back." For he knew that her pride would resent a gift. "Just until you get to England. I can give you a draft on Cook's here. You'd find it a perfectly simple affair."

"*Merci, non!* I've plenty of money." Her head went up at the suggestion. "I've just received a cheque from town with full instructions how to cash it."

"Well, don't be vexed with me, old girl! I'm worried enough at leaving you." He slipped a strong arm about her. "Say you'll miss me a little?"

"Horribly! I can't believe that this is our last hour together." She leaned across and kissed his cheek, relenting her sudden touchiness. What a dear he was to

think of all that concerned her peace and comfort. "But I can't borrow. I never have. Even from *you!* It's a fad of mine."

"And a very good one," laughed Doran. "Listen, there's one thing more. If we're married in a hurry, and there seems every likelihood, is there anyone I have to consult about your marriage settlement? Have you a lawyer or trustee?"

"No. I'm quite alone in the world."

His smiling face clouded over. Who the devil was Abel Groot?

"I see."

She felt the change in him with the instinctive knowledge of love.

"You'd rather I had people behind me?"

Her dark eyes were slightly wistful. But they met his grey ones so candidly that he called himself a brute to doubt her.

"Except for your own sake, darling, I'm very thankful that you haven't. I think 'in laws' must be a trial and I like to feel I have the right to the whole of you. I'm foolishly jealous. There were times when I wanted to kick Phipps!"

This made her laugh. The little cloud that had threatened their happiness dispersed. They talked of the old days at Venice and then, as the inexorable hands of the hotel clock moved forward to the hour of parting, they grew silent.

"Now." Doran rose to his feet. He moved across to the door and set his shoulders squarely against it to prevent any unwelcome invasion. "Come and kiss me — properly."

They clung together for a moment. When she drew back he saw that the tears were glittering on her long lashes.

"You'll cross the moment I wire for you?" His own voice was suspiciously husky.

She nodded her head, blinking hard.

"And you'll marry me — without delay? Next week if I think it wise?"

"Yes."

He swung her off her feet in a grateful hug that brought from her lips a swift breathless cry for mercy. "Francis! You're killing me!"

He put her down, flushed and smiling, and gave a low laugh of triumph.

"There! You see. I'm not a weakling — after all!" Then he opened the door. "Don't come out — stay here. But write to-morrow to Holly Walk — without fail. I shall get the letter on my arrival. Take care of your dear self. God bless you!"

He was gone.

CHAPTER XXV

"JUDY, dear, are you awake?" Bella's voice was very feeble.

A crumpled figure on the sofa unrolled itself from a blanket and pattered across to the bed.

"Anything wrong, old girl?"

"No, only I feel so restless. I wonder what time it is."

Judy already had lighted the lamp. Her face looked worn and very anxious.

"Have a spoonful of Liebig's jelly?"

Bella smiled.

"I think it will. Dear me, it's only four! How slowly the night goes."

"It will soon be dawn," Judy soothed her. She looked a quaint masculine figure in pyjamas striped grey and blue, her thick short hair ruffled above the wide brows and candid eyes. "Now then," she slipped an arm under the pillow carefully and propped up the invalid as she fed her. "That's right. Now, another one. How d'you feel, old lady?"

For Bella had had a second attack of fainting the day before and the doctor had warned the younger sister that his patient's condition was serious.

"Rather weak and fluttery," Bella helplessly admitted. Her pale blue eyes seemed more sunken and her lips had an ominous grey tinge.

Judy glanced again at the clock. Too soon for the medicine.

"Well, if that doesn't pull you together we'll give you a little drop of brandy. You look better than you did." She tried to lie cheerfully.

Bella leaned back, her eyes half closed.

"I'm keeping you awake," she murmured.

"I wasn't asleep," said Judy quickly. She sat down on the chair by the bed, patted her sister's flaccid hand

and then slipped her fingers higher feeling for the feeble pulse.

Bella waited for the verdict.

"Going strong," Judy informed her. "We'll soon get you round, old chap. What you want is a change of air. Venice is getting a bit relaxing."

For she knew that the timid creature was fretting over the imminent prospect of war and their nearness to the frontier feeling that nowhere was she safe from the menace of Armageddon. It worried Judy considerably too; for Bella was unfit to travel and the slightest alarm might prove fatal. Despite her own strong courage she quailed before the possibility of an attack on the island city by sea or air, not for herself but for its effect on the invalid.

"I'm quite happy here," said Bella somewhat unexpectedly. "We needn't worry — about plans. Not yet. Wait and see." Her voice trailed off as if the effort of speech was too much for her strength.

"Well then, you must get to sleep." Judy proceeded to turn out the lamp.

The room was shrouded in heavy shadows thrown by the primitive night-light, a wick in a little saucer of oil, placed in the washing basin. It sent a grotesque silhouette of Judy on to the farther wall, with a big nose and a tuft of hair standing upright upon her head.

Bella made no direct rejoinder. She seemed to be murmuring to herself. The anxious watcher bent and listened to the weak disjointed speech.

"Always the same," Bella whispered. "Kind and thoughtful — a *good* sister."

Judy recoiled, her face working. She was stung by a sudden dart of remorse. Many a time had she made fun of the other's hypochondriacal ways and used her own forcible will not exactly as a bully but as a master, to stir Bella out of her nervous lethargy. Now she repented her moments of harshness.

The misty blue eyes opened wide and met the brown ones. Bella smiled.

"I feel better," she said faintly. "Don't sit up, Judy dear."

At this evidence of unselfishness the woman beside her

yielded to a sudden impulse of affection. She stooped quickly and kissed her sister.

"Oh, Judy!" The rare caress startled Bella. Her lips quivered. "I believe you're really fond of me."

Judy gulped in her throat.

"If you don't know it by now, old chap, you ought to." Her voice was gruff. "I'm going to stay here for a bit just to watch you tumble off. So try and rest." She laid her hand over the one on the counterpane.

"Yes," said Bella. "I'm tired, but—" Judy bent to catch the word lost in the soft pillow. "Happy" was what it sounded like.

The fingers under hers stirred weakly and clasped her own. It was like a child's silent call for protection.

Judy's tightened. With all her will she tried to pass on some of her strength to the huddled figure by her side.

Silence fell on the dim room, save for the short laboured breath of the invalid. Judy stared hopelessly across to the window, where a faint fugitive line of light showed between the warped shutters. Thank God, the dawn was breaking. She could hear the clock ticking away on the marble mantelpiece. It sounded feverish as though it, too, prayed for morning.

Her thoughts became practical. She must get the doctor round early. She didn't like the look of things. Surely there must be some drug more powerful than this medicine? And could she get some good beef tea? She didn't fancy this tinned jelly. She must see the Signora and insist. Miss Flinders was a fool!

Somewhere afar a campanile chimed slowly the hour again and the basket chair by the window creaked as though it awoke to life. A breeze slipped down the *rio* and rattled an unfastened shutter with the imp-like qualities of wind that finds a city wrapped in slumber.

Suddenly she felt a quick spasmodic pressure on her hand. She bent closer in alarm, but Bella seemed to be asleep.

"Muscular," she said to herself. "Just a jerk as she went off. But how feeble her breathing is! I wish I'd given her some brandy. Still, sleep's the best cure." She took a grip upon her nerves.

Slowly the hours crawled on. A dull pain was in her arm; her head throbbed and her bare feet were as cold as ice, but she dared not move.

In an odd way it relieved the strain to feel that she was suffering too. Poor old Bella! What a life. Her thoughts went back to the old days and her sister's prim prettiness before the blow that broke her spirit.

The doctor had said "no stamina." It would take days to build her up. And meanwhile at any moment Italy might be plunged in war. She began to wonder if there were a decent hotel at Padua. That would be away from the sea and they could get from there to Bologna and on into Switzerland by easy stages, via Turin.

The glimmer of light at the window spread and gathered strength until she could see tiny dancing motes of dust caught up in its stream.

But the heavy silence seemed to increase. It weighed upon her like a portent. And then, in a blinding flash of pain, she realized that no sound came from the quiet figure on the bed, no fitful breathing. All was still. Bella had passed through the portals of sleep into a land of eternal rest.

. . . . . .

Van Degan, always an early riser, was busy upon his latest portrait, when he heard a pebble strike the window of the studio overlooking the *campo*.

Surprised, he laid his palette down and, a brush still held between his teeth, opened the casement and leaned out. Judy was standing in the square.

"Good! You're up. Can I speak to you?"

He needed no second bidding.

"Sure!" He ran down the stairs and flung the street door wide.

"Come right in. I'm glad to see you." He held out his hand and paused, frowning. For Judy's was icy. Even her face looked blue in the early light. "How cold you are." He drew her through. Then as they stood in the narrow passage. "What's wrong?" he asked gravely.

"I'll tell you in the studio. If we can have it to ourselves."

He nodded his head and led the way silently up the steep stairs where a fortnight since the gay crowd of guests had passed, Judy among them, absurd in her huge wooden sabots.

She was dressed now with her usual care, her monocle swinging from its cord, her grey suit brushed and speckless. But about her for the first time he noticed the shadow of the years. Her physical energy was unflagging but her spirit was that of middle age.

Because his love was of the kind that sees in the loved one an ideal, the reflection purely of character independent of outward beauty, age had no power to lessen it, and the knowledge that she was in sore trouble awoke in him an answering thrill of protection hitherto denied him by the virile note of her temperament. He loved her the more in that she came instinctively to him in her need.

Judy breathed a sigh of relief when she found herself safe in the studio. It was all so exactly like "V.D." The sense of space and quiet reflection and workmanlike simplicity, a shade ascetic but withal wholesome.

"Now." He pushed a chair forward.

She sat down and crossed her legs.

"Bella's dead." Her voice was abrupt.

"Gee!" He stared at her aghast. The news was utterly unexpected.

"Yes. Don't sympathize." She put up a hand to ward off any attempt in this direction. "There's a lot to arrange. I want your help."

"You can count on that." His slate-blue eyes were full of the things he dared not say. For he understood this woman he loved.

"Then give me a drink," said Judy gruffly. The room was playing her queer tricks, the floor dancing up and down. She had not realized before how those last piteous offices to the dead had tried her nervous strength. Everywhere she could see that face, noble, with its fixed smile that seemed to speak of a hidden triumph, and strangely young, rise up before her and the meek grace of the folded hands.

Van Degan went across to a cupboard, produced spirits and a glass and filled it up with bottled water. She drank it down to the dregs.

"Thanks. Sorry to trouble you, but I felt just a bit rocky."

She drew out her big bandanna and blew her nose vigorously.

"Died in her sleep," she said from behind the gaudy brown and yellow screen. "Painless. Heart failed. I was beside her — luckily. Now I want things decent. No one knows. I took the key. What I can't stand"— her face worked —"is the damned fuss in the *pension.* Sure to be one. What can I do?"

"Leave them to me," said Van Degan grimly. "I reckon this is a man's job." He adopted her own nonchalant manner. "Give me a minute to get things fixed." He strode across to the window and stared out. Behind his back his hands were gripped and she saw the knuckles gleaming white and prominent. It was the only visible mark of emotion about the lean figure.

When he returned his face had cleared.

"You'd better go round, pack up and quit. I'll have your room ready, next to Nedda's. It's small but quiet, cool too. That's the first thing to do."

"But I *can't* leave her." Judy quivered.

"No need. I'll see the doctor and arrange about an ambulance. We'll have the funeral from this house. It's a private matter, I opine. It don't concern the *pension.*"

Judy's eyes opened wide.

"Bring her here?" she asked slowly. As he nodded she rose to her feet. "Oh, V.D.!" It was a cry of infinite gratitude and relief. Here was sanctity for Bella, far from those curious whispering tongues.

Then sharply she turned away. Her head went down on to her hands. She was torn by a spasm of silent sobbing, crueller far than any tears.

She felt a pair of strong arms, spare and sinewy, folded round her.

"Judy, Judy! My dear old pal." He found by instinct the right word.

"I'm a fool, V.D.!" Judy choked. "But to see her snuffed out like a candle! I didn't expect it." Her shoulders heaved. "Damned fool! — I haven't cried — not once — up to now. You'll think me —"

He interrupted her.

"I *know* you. Isn't that good enough?"

She leaned for a moment against his shoulder drinking in unconsciously his man's strength, subtly aware of the smell of tobacco about his coat and the strong hard beat of his heart.

It quickened and she drew away, winning back her self-control, with a last convulsive effort. She stole a nervous glance at him.

The man's face was irradiated as though a light burnt behind, the longing visible in his eyes. His soul lay bare for her to read but his lips were silent. He would not stoop to win her in her hour of weakness. It warred with his sense of chivalry.

"You can count on me," he repeated hoarsely. He meant it in more senses than one.

And Judy, with the quickened instincts that death brings to some deeply sincere and loyal natures, guessed the conflict in his heart.

"I do, old chap — in *every* way." The colour rushed up to her brow but she would not lower her proud head.

Van Degan made a quick movement towards her, then he checked himself.

"Sure. As if I were — your brother." Jerkily he helped her out.

"No." She stamped her foot on the floor, impatient over his obtuseness. Across all her misery came a flicker of humour. Here she was, playing again her masculine rôle. "Shall I have to propose to him?" she thought.

Van Degan squared his lean shoulders.

"Judy." He spoke in a hoarse voice. "Don't you say anything you'll regret. I reckon I know how we stand. I've figured it out pretty straight. There's no need to say I love you. I've worshipped you for fifteen years. I shall so long as there's breath in my body. But I'd rather have your honest friendship than any other woman's love. I've got that. It's *some* gift. I don't want anything more — through pity." He jerked his head on the word.

It was a most eccentric wooing but it went straight to Judy's heart.

"*Pity!*" she scoffed. "I'd see you damned before I'd

pity you, V.D.! One gives that sort of thing to weaklings. You're strong. I thought *I* was. Perhaps I've gone on that tack too far. It's caught me out." She came a step nearer him, a new light in her face. "You're a lonely man?" She was pleading now.

He nodded his head.

"So am I. I'm up against it — *hard*, old chap. I shall make you a rotten bad wife. A figure of fun for all the world to laugh at — I know that. It's kept me havering many a day. But I think we'll get our laugh back. And if you want me —"

He held her now in a grip that hurt and yet rejoiced her.

"By God, I do!"

"Then take me," said Judy.

CHAPTER XXVI

ISOËL came slowly out of the big door of the "Bon Marché," and paused on the threshold to run through her list, the last details of her trousseau.

To-morrow night would see her in England and on Saturday she was to be married.

Doran had been passed by the Board for home service. He was appointed Adjutant to a Reserve Unit stationed in the North of England with a week's further extension of leave which would allow for their wedding-day and a hurried honeymoon.

This was all that she knew at present; for, with the irregular postal service, no letter yet had reached her, though her lover had been extravagant in the matter of telegrams.

Nothing could have suited her better. She had lived strung up to the highest tension since the hour of their engagement, prepared to answer difficult questions concerning her people and her past; and, although she had been saved this ordeal through Doran's seeming incuriousness, she felt there could be no real safety until she was legally his wife. She missed his presence, yet was aware of a certain relief these last few days, filled with a busy round of shopping and golden dreams of the future.

Analyzing her sensations, she discovered that her old ambition had taken now a new form, purified by her love for Doran. Her one desire was that nothing should shake his pride and confidence in herself and that she should prove worthy of him — even down to the detail of dress.

With the Gallic instincts strong in her she bought few clothes, but those good, quiet in tone and well cut, with dainty hand-sewn underlinen.

"It's fortunate that I'm stock size," she thought as she walked down the Rue du Bac. "There was no time

to get things made and Paris isn't exactly cheap. Anyhow, not in war-time!"

She paused for a moment before a shop where some evening shoes attracted her.

"I wonder if I could afford those?" She looked at them wistfully. "Better not." She moved on.

For her funds were getting rather low and she had no idea what it might cost to stay for two nights at the *Russell* where she had engaged a room.

A whirlwind of dust rose from the street half-blinding her, and a fat woman knitting in the open doorway of a *maison de charcuterie* uttered a sharp exclamation and followed it up by the remark:

"*C'est la pluie qui va tomber.*"

Isoël, still blinking, agreed with the good dame's prophecy as she glanced up at the sky. It was veiled by scudding clouds, faintly pink at the edges, for the evening was drawing in, the sun low on the horizon.

She was tired by the long period spent in the stuffy air of the "Bon Marché" and she longed for a good cup of tea but knew of no shop in the vicinity. Then a happy thought struck her. She would go to the *Nain Noir* and indulge in some of their excellent coffee.

She found the way with little trouble and was greeted by Madame Jolivard as an old friend, the garrulous soul delighted to find "*la belle Anglaise*" so proficient in her language.

The restaurant was deserted but Gustave hovered in the background, arranging the narrow tables for dinner, hiding the splashes on the cloths with clean napkins and giving the forks a furtive rub with a duster.

He came up presently with the brown coffee-pot as Madame retired to her desk and to her patient toil at the ledger.

"*Bon soir, mademoiselle.*" His blue eyes dwelt on the girl wistfully, admiring her beauty. So plainly absent-minded was he that he filled her cup till it overflowed.

Madame Jolivard scolded him shrilly from the box. But Isoël, watching his shaky hands, poured oil on the troubled waters.

"*Ça ne fait rien,*" she said gaily. "I am getting more than my share, *voyons!* One does not expect that in

war-time." Her clear young laugh rang through the room.

"Mademoiselle is too indulgent." The *patronne* was mollified. Gustave returned with a clean saucer, tremulous and apologetic.

"Thank you." She spoke in English purposely and the man started. "You understand?"

He shook his head.

"*Mademoiselle dit?*"

But she was not convinced. The little sense of mystery piqued her.

"Have you never been to England?" she asked in his own tongue.

"*Non, jamais!*" He spoke quickly. "Mademoiselle desires sugar?"

He held it suspended above her cup. She noticed his worn but well shaped fingers and recalled Doran's summing-up.

"You are not a native of Paris, are you?"

He hesitated.

"I am from Alsace." As he saw her eye-brows go up in surprise, he went on hastily, "From a little village across the frontier." He seemed anxious she should believe him.

She nodded her head tranquilly.

"Then you've seen something of the fighting?"

He mumbled an indistinct reply and retreated.

"Mademoiselle will excuse me. I have to prepare for the dinner."

She watched him with his dragging step return to his old occupation. Silence reigned in the quiet space save for an occasional murmur from Madame adding her column of figures.

"*Neuf et cinq font quatorze. Et huit*—" She flicked it off with her pen.

Isoël was glad to rest. The coffee was most refreshing. She wondered if the thin figure, hovering over the knives and forks, had suffered a shock through the war. The man seemed a bundle of nerves. As Madame brought out a triumphant "*vingtdeux*," Gustave jumped, then glanced sideways furtively at the stout lady. A blue-bottle came droning in through the wide central

window where the glass screens were drawn aside, showing a pair of marble tables with the inevitable jars of red-headed sulphurous matches and the empty chairs on the pavement beyond. Business was evidently slack.

After a little, as though drawn like a magnet in her direction, Gustave wandered back again. In his hand was a vase with a wilted pair of the early roses dear to the Parisian heart, butter-coloured with long thin stems. He placed this down on her table.

She was touched by the little attention.

"*Merci bien.*" She stooped to smell them but they were scentless like most forced flowers. A petal dropped upon the cloth. She picked it up and examined it. "These won't be out yet in England. This is my last day in France."

"Mademoiselle returns to London?" Again that wistful admiring glance.

"Yes. I am going home to be married." She smiled up at the thin face, sallow and heavily marked by lines. Yet once, she thought, he might have been handsome, with those blue, blue eyes and the fine arched nose.

"Mademoiselle has my best wishes." He looked at her curiously. "To the Monsieur, perhaps, who lunched here?"

She nodded her head, shyly amused. Had they looked such obvious lovers?

"Monsieur, *sans doute,* is in the army?" Gustave ventured, encouraged by the girl's friendly attitude.

"Yes. However did you know?"

He explained in his old nervous manner.

"One sees many English soldiers in Paris. It is a type that one recognizes easily. The mark of the drill—"

His further words were checked by a sudden ominous noise, the distant crash of an explosion.

Outside in the street people were running, seeking shelter, with shrill cries of warning and fear. Madame Jolivard had slid with surpassing agility from her stool, forced her body through the opening and stood now by Isoël's side.

"*Vite, mademoiselle! Par ici*—" She dragged the girl breathlessly to the rear of the restaurant and into a narrow room beyond, dark and screened by a heavy cur-

tain. *"Encore une Taube! Mon Dieu, mon Dieu!"* She sank in a heap on the sofa still clutching Isoël's arm. "My poor windows! And glass at a price that one does not dare to think about!"

It was evident that her heart was torn more by the prospect of expense than by any mere physical danger.

"Ah, ciel!" She screamed aloud. For the place seemed to rock about them with an ear-splitting roar close at hand that was mixed with the acid clatter of glass, a dog's howl and the purring throb of the aeroplane beating along above the thin veil of clouds.

The whole catastrophe had come so swiftly out of the evening sky that Isoël had hardly time to realize the full peril. She felt instead the curious calm that people of highly-strung nerves, apprehensive before the event, so often exhibit at such a crisis.

"It's gone now," she soothed the *patronne*. "They never come back the same way. I've been in a Zeppelin raid in London. *Rassurez-vous, ma bonne dame.*"

Madame Jolivard looked dazed.

"My windows —" she gasped out. "Once before they have played me this trick. *Ces sacrés Boches!*" The malediction seemed to bring her to her senses. *"Voyons!"* She rose heavily. "Mademoiselle has a great courage. We will go together and inspect."

She pulled aside the plush curtain.

A scene of wreckage met their eyes. The building itself had been spared, ceiling and walls uncracked, but only a few splinters remained in the heavy sheets of plate glass and the floor was covered with shining fragments. Outside one marble-topped table had survived the shock but the other had fallen, split in two, by the broken contorted legs of a chair. The bomb had struck the open street fifty yards from the restaurant, by a miracle missing the clustered houses, boring a great gaping hole. The cloud of dust was settling slowly. Through the haze Isoël saw something that checked the beat of her heart; a prostrate figure, arms thrown up over its face stretched full length close to the corner where she had sat.

"Look, look!" She pointed, trembling. Madame Jolivard followed her glance.

"Mon Dieu, le pauvre! Quel imbécile!" The two

phrases jostled each other quaintly as she hurried forward. "It must be that a splinter has struck him. To stay like that near the windows!"

A passer-by paused, curious.

Madame beckoned imperiously.

"*Venez donc!* Give assistance. One must help each other in times like these."

"Willingly, Madame." He crossed the threshold. Together they bore their light burden into the parlour at the back and laid the body on the sofa. There was no scratch on the still grey face from which the blood seemed to have ebbed, no outward sign of injury as Madame's hands ran over him.

Yet the head hung limp, the lips parted. "He is finished, that one," said the man. "It must have been the shock to his heart."

"Incredible!" Madame fumed. She pushed up the frayed cuff sharply to feel his pulse. "*Tiens,* a sailor!" She stared at his wrist.

Isoël, white and shaken, stood at the foot of the couch. She followed the *patronne's* surprised glance and saw on the thin bony arm a bluish band twisting round it and upward in a spiral. It was a snake — she caught her breath — tattooed on the white flesh!

"It beats," said Madame triumphantly, her podgy fingers on the wrist. "If Monsieur would be so good as to reach for the cognac there, on the second shelf"—she jerked her head in the direction—"we will soon put some life in him. It is the best, but, *que voulez-vous?*" She shrugged her shoulders wearily as though, in this hour of expense, it were hopeless to count the *sous.*

She took the glass from the helpful stranger, propped up the waiter's head and began to trickle some of the spirit between the discoloured lips.

"*Bon!* He swallows." A faint contraction of the emaciated throat where she had loosened the soiled collar rewarded her efforts. "It is a nothing! He will soon be on his legs again."

She saw that her unknown friend had glanced anxiously at his watch.

"*Monsieur est pressé?* Will he not take a *petit verre* before he goes?"

The man declined, apologizing.

"Madame is good, but one waits for me."

"Then another day," said the *patronne,* gracious. "Monsieur has done me a great service. I am infinitely obliged to him."

They went deliberately through the correct etiquette of farewell. It seemed endless to Isoël, staring down at the grey face that showed no reviving symptoms of life.

At length with a last bow and smile, directed this time to the girl and a gallant "*Au revoir, Madame,*" to the *patronne* the stranger departed.

They were free to attend to the sick man.

"He does not hurry himself," said Madame, discouraged by Gustave's attitude. "If Mademoiselle would stay for a minute, I could run across to Monsieur Pitou, the *pharmacien* at the corner. He is a good friend of mine and will volunteer his advice. It is but the affair of a moment." She glanced keenly at the girl. "Mademoiselle is not afraid?" For Isoël's face was very white.

"Not in the least." She tried to smile.

"Mademoiselle is an angel of goodness." The *patronne* waited for no more. She was off, patting her hair into place. For the chemist was an old admirer.

Isoël watched the curtain fall, then, with a feeling of fascination and horror mixed, she knelt down by the side of the unconscious man and gazed, trembling, at his wrist.

Could it be? Those blue, blue eyes — they had seemed in some odd way familiar.

A little shiver ran through her as they opened wide suddenly and gazed into her own dark ones.

His lips moved. She bent closer.

"Miriam!"

She caught her breath.

"Yes?" She answered him in English, with an effort mastering her emotion.

"Fetch — the child." His lids closed; he seemed to relapse into his stupor.

But now she knew. There was no mistake. It was her father lying there.

Pity and infinite repugnance warred within her, all her dreams blown to the four winds of heaven.

This, the object of her pride; the parent of gentle birth, held up to her as a model by her fond and foolish mother; this out-at-elbows wastrel, with the marks of drink upon his face, his shrinking, obsequious manners — Gervase Dark, her childish hero?

For a moment anger gained the day. Then as she marked his deathly pallor, his air of shabby misery, a nobler instinct arose in her. Tears flooded her sombre eyes.

Her father — brought to such a pass!

Could punishment be greater for his desertion of her mother. Had he not paid the price?

She caught, in a sudden inward flash, a glimpse of those laws of Cause and Effect that govern Sin, and a hell on earth hitherto unknown to her.

Dark stirred on the narrow sofa. With a fluttering breath he came back from the valley of the shadows.

He gazed at the girl through half-closed lids.

"*Mademoiselle?*"

Again she saw the shrinking apologetic glance. Then his face suddenly changed. It seemed to quicken into life. For a moment the filmy cloud was raised that obscured her early memories. Here was the playmate of her youth, with his brilliant eyes and fine-cut features.

"The child!" His voice was clear and urgent.

Her spirit rose to its full courage.

"I'm here — *Father.*" She clasped his hand. "It's Isoël. You remember me?"

A look of wonder and contentment crossed his face. He raised himself up.

"*Isoël!*"

With her name on his lips the soul of Gervase Dark passed out.

. . . . . .

The events that followed seemed like a nightmare. Madame Jolivard bustled in with her friend the chemist and found the girl dazed by the side of the dead man.

Monsieur Pitou, with sound sense, turned his attentions to the living. They forced Isoël to drink some of the famous cognac.

Madame was full of self-reproaches. She hadn't "imagined to herself" that such a thing could occur. It was

"of the most unforeseen"! Th worthy old chemist reassured her. The man's life had not been worth "two sous" for many a day. The shock of the explosion had killed him. Madame must not blame herself. Gustave's "weakness" was well known in the *quartier*. Deprived of his *absinthe* by the recent prohibition — and a good thing too!

He wandered off down this side-track prophesying that there would be fewer suicides in France, and lunatics, and rickety children. As a chemist *parbleu!* — *he* knew.

Isoël escaped at last from the unceasing buzz of chatter, glad to lean back in a springless *fiacre* and let the air blow in her face.

"I mustn't think," she warned herself. "Not till I get to my own room. I daren't." She tried to concentrate her mind on the driver's white hat.

Why was it white? And so shiny?

On they went, shaving the curb at the corners in the fantastic way in which the cabmen of Paris rejoiced, in bygone days, to court danger, before the swift "autos" brought an easier method of destruction. For this was a veteran thrown beach high by the invading tide of war.

When they drew up at her hotel she overpaid him and hurried in, stealthily passing the bureau, up the stairs and into her room filled with the grey, regretful twilight. Here she turned and locked the door.

Safe! With a quick sob of relief she flung herself on the narrow bed, her hot face pressed to the pillow and gave vent to her despair.

This was the end of everything. Now her sensitive pride lay stripped to its bare bones, the last shred of golden romance tattered and gone.

Isoël Dark — her "father's daughter" . . .

What was there left to her? No gift beyond her youth and beauty, which would swiftly fade, to lay down at her lover's feet in return for all he offered. Unconsciously, these last weeks, the memory of the dead man had been a moral support to the girl — that honoured "father in the Navy"!

Through him she belonged to Doran's class. Now the last glory had fled. She stood alone, a social outcast.

Blacker and blacker, there rose up the long indictment of deception. Her teeth closed in an agony of shame on the linen pillow. She was no better than humble Patty, resolute to capture Bert! Worse. For Patty never aspired to marriage above her own class.

What had Mrs. Serocold called her? An "adventuress"! It was true.

And then at the lowest rung of despair the reaction of youth set in. Her pride, wounded mortally but not slain, rose to her help. Doran had never questioned her. What right had he to her past? She had kept herself serenely pure. Was that not enough for him?

"I can give him at least the future intact." She clasped her feverish hands together. Hope dawned in her eyes. "So long as I live," she cried aloud, "I will never tell him another lie!"

A thought followed close on the heels of this resolution. There was time to confess the whole truth still, to be open with him before her marriage.

For a moment she faced it in the glow of a fervent desire to act aright. Then she shrank from the sacrifice, aware of all that it might involve.

She knew the strength of his character. He might forgive her — but forget?

No. He would never trust her again! And what were love without respect? There would remain pity and passion, dregs in her golden cup of life.

A hot feeling of resentment rose in her heart. Was she to blame for the sins and follies of her parents? For the father who had deserted her and the mother who had brought her up on a framework of falsehood, sewing the seeds of the girl's inordinate ambition?

"It isn't fair!" She thrust back a lock that fell over her tear-stained eyes. "I didn't *ask* to be born!" The old cry of Man to his Maker.

From where she crouched on the high bed she could see out of the open window, above the roofs, the evening sky, dim but fresh, and free of the clouds that had followed the course of the westerly wind. A pale star peeped forth, very demure and timorous — like a primrose bud between dark leaves — the first promise of the night.

It seemed to soothe her sore young heart. So tiny and alone, held up by invisible chains.

All life was a lonely business. Only one thing redeemed it. *Love!* She felt a hungry longing and stretched out her empty arms.

"Oh, Francis, I want you so!" Piteous, she cried across the gulf. "I will be good. I *promise* you. But I can't tell you — I can't, I can't!"

CHAPTER XXVII

"I WONDER if you've stopped?" said Patty.

She took the little Bee clock and gave it a shake. It showed its resentment by a faint whirr of the alarum. Then it ticked in the vicious way she knew so well on a dark morning when bed seemed a downy nest and the Stores a monster beckoning.

"No, it's only just eleven! Anyhow it's nearly time. I wish that quilt had come back from the wash." She looked at the bed ruefully. "I'd take off this one if the blankets weren't as bad underneath. Things get that black in London! There's no keeping a place clean. Hope Brixton will be better." She blew a smut off the tablecloth. "Anyhow, *that's* a fresh one!"

She gazed happily at the array of good things surrounding a bunch of daffodils in a bright pink vase that gave an "artistic" air to the supper.

"Good of Bert to send that pie. 'Veal and ham,' he said it was. I'm glad I thought of the radishes. She'll be hungry after her journey."

Wandering across to the window she stared out into the dark and went on with her monologue.

"I won't tell her till after she's fed." She was twisting a ring on her left hand. "I don't know how to break the news that Bert wants it to be at Easter. Seems like leaving her in the lurch." She started and listened eagerly. "Here she is!" Off she went, clattering down the stone stairs. "Isoël — that you?"

"Patty!" came up in an answering cry.

The next moment she held the girl tightly in a warm embrace.

Isoël clung to her. It was good to be met by such hearty affection.

"Where's your luggage?" Patty peered beyond her through the dim-lit hall.

"I shan't have it till the morning." Isoël had foreseen the question. "I've brought all I want here."

Half-laughing, half-repentant, she thrust a parcel towards her friend and they surged upstairs, Patty's arm flung round the slender waist.

"Now, let's have a look at you!" The red-haired girl had banged the door and drawn the traveller under the light. "Pretty as ever! And *so* smart." She kissed her again on both cheeks. "Lor, I'm glad to have you back!"

"And *you* look fine," said Isoël sweetly. "Is that the new Spring frock? And"—she caught Patty's hand and gazed at it—"a ring! Bert's? You're engaged!"

"I didn't mean to tell you yet," her candid friend blurted out.

"Didn't you—you little fraud!" Isoël gave her a playful shake. "I *am* glad. When's it to be? Soon, I hope."

Patty stared. It was so unexpected.

"I'll tell you everything after supper." She kept to her original programme. "Look what a spread I've got for you."

The visitor gave a little gasp. She had dined late at the hotel with Doran who had paced the platform for a full hour impatiently, waiting for the boat-train.

Patty took it for admiration.

"See that pie? Bert sent it, express for you. He gets them from a place in the city. Wasn't it nice of the old dear? I remembered that you liked *éclairs* and radishes and there's ginger ale! Hope you've got an appetite?"

Isoël saw a road of escape.

"Well,"—she made a little face—"you're a darling to give me such a welcome, but we had a perfectly awful crossing!"

It was true; still, a good sailor, she had enjoyed the adventure.

"Oh, you poor child!" said Patty. "Don't I know what that means. I once went for a trip to Margate and thought my last hour was come! Take off your hat and sit down. You shan't eat more than you feel like."

Isoël, relieved, obeyed.

"I'd love a radish and something to drink. You begin and I'll talk. It's so nice to see you again." They drew

up to the table. "Now, tell me everything. *Did* he propose in the coal-hole?"

Patty laughed, with flushed cheeks.

"No. It happened on the beach, the last evening. The worst of it was we thought we were quite alone, sitting with our backs against the wheel of an old bathing-machine. And when we got up to come home, there, on the other side of it, was an elderly gent who laughed at us. But Bert soon tackled him."

"How?" Isoël's eyes were dancing.

"Oh, just told him he supposed he'd forgotten the days when he was young! Bert's always got an answer. It made the old chap sit up! So when we got to the Esplanade Bert turned and waved his hat."

"You must have enjoyed yourselves," Isoël put in tactfully.

Patty nodded her red head.

"Bert's a darling — *so* generous! He's given me lots of things but now we've got to go slow and save up for the furniture." She attacked the pie lustily.

"Have you fixed a date for the wedding?" Isoël's voice was quite serene.

Patty gave her a nervous glance.

"No. That is, Bert *thought* — but of course nothing's settled yet — that Easter seemed —" She broke off. "*Don't* think I'm deserting you! We'll talk it all over later. You'll have to come and stay with us."

"Dear old Patty!" Isoël leaned across the table, rather touched. "You needn't be afraid of that, for I've been dreading telling you. I'm going to be married myself — soon. So everything's for the best."

"Great Scott!" Patty's eyes opened wide. "Is that the secret?" For Isoël had hinted at one in her hurried letter from Paris.

"Yes." They looked at each other and laughed. "I didn't dare write the news."

"Same here!" Patty danced on her rickety chair with excitement. "Who is it? Let's hear! Has he given you a ring?"

Isoël extended her hand.

"My! Is it *real?*" Patty was awed. "Must be a rich man. Not that Phipps you talked about?"

"Heavens, no! It's a soldier — Francis Doran. He's a V. C."

Now that the ice had been broken she poured it out breathlessly, the whole amazing tale of adventure. It seemed more fantastic than ever in the shabby, familiar room, with the friendly old mirror looking on under its cracked cornucopia. It reflected her warm beautiful face and the quick movements of her hands, and once she glanced up at it and nodded to the glowing vision.

"I always told you it would be so," she wound up triumphantly. "But you used to laugh at me and my dreams. I've used my *dot* for the trousseau."

"How much a year will you have?" Patty became practical. Isoël laughed.

"Fifteen thousand."

"What?" Patty bounced up. "You're pulling my leg! I won't believe it!"

"Then look at this," said Isoël. She drew out from inside her blouse the exquisite, shining row of pearls. "This is part of his wedding present and now he's giving me a car, a little motor landaulet. I'm going to drive in it to-morrow."

"Lord!" Patty's hand went up to a narrow chain about her neck from which hung a flat gold heart. Inside was Bert's portrait.

For a moment she felt annoyed. Isoël's wonderful romance threw her own so effectively into the background. It wasn't fair!

Then, as she still stared at her friend, a sudden fear shot through her heart rousing her old loyalty.

"You *love* him?" Her voice was sharp.

Isoël silently raised her eyes. Patty read the truth in them. There was passion, thinly-veiled, in their depths; but behind this was the shadow of fear.

Patty's anxiety increased. Instinct led her to the secret: that cloud which dimmed Isoël's joy.

"Does he know all about you?"

The heavy lids fluttered and fell. Isoël shrank back in her chair away from this direct attack. She knew, of old, Patty's methods.

"Not much." She evaded the question.

"Oh, *Isoël!*" Patty groaned. "What a bad beginning to marriage."

"Don't!" The harassed girl sprang up. "You can't understand! It's all for the best. Besides — he loves me for myself."

"Then he wouldn't mind *anything*. Does he know you were at Clotilde's?"

"No." Isoël turned away.

But Patty could see her in the mirror.

"He thinks you just a lady at large?" She went on, merciless.

Isoël's head was flung back.

"He knows that my father —" She stopped abruptly. Home in that familiar room, for a fleeting moment, she had forgotten. She gave a little despairing sob. "Oh, Patty, I'm so unhappy!"

Loving arms were flung about her. Her head went down on that kind shoulder, draped in the fearsome khaki frock with its cheap and tawdry violet ribbons.

"There, there —" Patty rocked her. "I'm a beast! You're tired out. You shall tell me all about it later, but now undress and get to bed. We'll have a chat in the dark — what Bert calls a 'heart to hearter.' Nothing like talking things through. There's *always* a way out."

Her homely philosophy was soothing. She began to unbutton the dainty blouse that had played no unimportant part in the great adventure, the selfsame one which had roused Mrs. Serocold's suspicions.

"You've got thinner," said Patty softly. "But that'll come all right with marriage, and everything else in the end. So don't you go fretting, child. If you love each other it's simply sure to. I used to worry about Bert — if he meant it or was fooling around — and then I found afterwards he'd had the same doubts of me! Love's like that — very perplexing. Seems to make you a bit dotty. But if your man's worth a button — and he must be, a V.C.! — he won't look down on you for working. Why," she gave a little snort, "he ought to go on his knees to you. A girl with a face and figure like yours that has kept herself straight all through."

Deftly she had undone the last of the blue suspenders.

"Nice to get yer stays off after a journey, isn't it? Now then, where's your nighty? In the parcel—righto!" She slipped it over the bowed head and proceeded to take down the shining coils of smooth honey-coloured hair. She brushed and plaited it lovingly. "Like old times, isn't it? There—when all's said and done there's nothing like another woman! Men don't always understand. I rather think that's why Eve got sick of Paradise — wanted some of her own sort when Adam had fair worn her out. In you go!" She turned back the dingy checked counterpane, and showed the coarse but spotless sheets. "Everything's clean and well-aired."

Thankfully the girl obeyed her. Then she turned her tear-stained face away from the light.

"I'm spoiling it all—" She choked on the words.

Patty smiled.

"Not a bit. The pie will keep, come in handy for our breakfast. I'll be glad to get to bed myself."

She made short work of her undressing, lowered the gas to the merest speck and slipped into the farther bed, then stretched a hand across the few inches of space between.

"Now, tell me everything."

Isoël made a full confession. Patty, grave-eyed in the dark, listened and kept a hold on her tongue. What a mistake it all had been, this mixture of courage and deception. But what a romance — incredible!

She saw how ambition had led the girl up to the heights of her success and how since a stronger force was warring with it — her passionate love.

She had always wanted the "best in life" but her childish vision had overlooked the essential factor: it must be built on a basis of truth — unlike dreams.

Now the sleeper had awakened, the filmy clouds of glory had fled. And with them a part of her happiness. Not for her was peace of mind.

Patty, hardened by a struggle for existence in a hard world, grimly tolerant of the weakness latent in humanity, anxious herself to be married, shrewd over money matters, had her own code of honour — a better one than Isoël's! She would not have stood in the latter's shoes

for twice that fifteen thousand pounds. She was full of the pride of the working-class. Equality and a mutual respect that gave and asked for no "favours," love upon a solid footing — this was *her* "best in life."

She felt anew, as she listened, her old contempt for the leisured class, their traditions of caste and convention and the intrigues of women like Tory. She forgot that in her own way she was equally bound by the laws of habit, that every grade of society has its petty deceits and ambitions. But when Isoël came at length to the grim story of the Taube and its victim in far-off Paris, her heart softened and overflowed.

"My, how *awful!*" She leaned across and took the girl in her plump young arms. "But you played the game. Poor man! It's nice to think you eased his passing. Fancy your father coming to that! It must have been a shock to you."

"But I can't tell Francis," Isoël moaned. "He saw him there — a common waiter!"

Patty thought for a moment.

"I don't see you've any call to. It's your father's secret as well as yours. He wouldn't have wished you to know. And he's dead. There'll be no further trouble. It's more loyal to say nothing. So don't go worrying over that. There's many a gentleman-born that sinks lower still when he takes to drink. Bert says it's a disease, like consumption or anything else. I think it was rather fine of him to keep away and work for his living. He didn't come home and sponge on you. He behaved decent at the last. It ought to be a sort of comfort."

"Yes." Isoël drank this in. "And he asked for my mother and for me. He hadn't forgotten." Her voice quivered.

"He's with her now," said Patty simply.

"I wonder." Isoël caught her breath.

"Why, of course," said the Protestant girl. "I don't hold with all your notions about purgatory. Poor old chap! He's had it here in this world. Don't you go forgetting that. *He's* all right! I'm not religious but I think, in the end, God's merciful; that, when we pay for our sins in life, it's chalked up to the good. I'm

rather doubtful about hell — always have been! Seems to me, we get it back here below. Why, you're paying this very minute for having told all those fibs! You'd be a much happier girl if you had it honestly out with Doran."

She felt Isoël recoil.

"I can't. *I daren't!* It's too late. We're going to be married on Saturday. There's only to-morrow —" She broke off. Patty had given a low whistle.

"As soon as that? Why?" She gripped the girl closer. Her voice was sharp.

Isoël, serenely unconscious, explained the reason for their haste. Patty's tense arms relaxed. "I might have known," she said to herself.

Isoël went on:

"And I've got to the end of my money. I'm simply dreading the hotel bill. You see, I sent a hundred francs to Madame Jolivard that night. For the funeral. I felt I must. To have him buried like a pauper — *non, jamais!*"

Patty hugged her.

"You're an angel!"

She sympathized. In no class of life is the fear of neglecting outward respect to the dead more strong than in her own. In this lies the prevailing horror of the workhouse to the poor.

Long they talked into the night, but arrived at no hopeful conclusion. Patty expended her eloquence in vain. Isoël stood firm. In the end the elder girl was imbued with the same doubts. She saw clearly the danger of her own counsels.

Suppose Doran threw Isoël over, what was to become of her? Without Patty's common sense, alone, reckless and broken-hearted? Worse evils might befall her. Patty, honest and clear-sighted, blamed the dead Miriam and her romantic lack of sense which had influenced the growing girl.

And you couldn't "count on the gentry"! Socialistic to the core, she felt a rising inclination to help this pretty, aspiring creature to "get even" for once with the rich and patronizing class she despised; and yet, in

some corner of her heart — true to centuries-old traditions — admired, although she would not admit it.

A clock outside chimed slowly two.

Patty started. How late it was! Isoël would be a wreck and unfit for the coming day.

"Well, ducky, sleep on it," she wound up tenderly. "I'll turn out the light and tuck you up — for the last time." Her eyes filled.

Isoël did not demur. She was worn out, body and soul. But a practical thought occurred to Patty as she snuggled down again.

"Won't they miss you at the hotel?" For Isoël had confessed to this part of her broken agreement, inwardly relieved to find that Patty accepted it as natural.

"No," the weary whisper came back. "I told the chamber-maid not to call me, that I'd get my own bath. My rule was to rise early and have a walk before breakfast! So, when I slipped away, I put some shoes outside the door and thoroughly rumpled up the bed. You see I think of every detail? I was born to be an adventuress!"

She gave a bitter little laugh, recalling Tory's summing-up. It was one of those arrows that sting through life when worthier speeches go down into unfathomable depths.

It hurt the girl beside her more than all that had passed between them. It was so unlike the Isoël of the days of Clotilde, gay and proud.

"You're not to talk like that," she scolded. "I won't have it! D'you hear?"

After a moment a little hand slipped across and felt for her own.

"Dear Patty. I didn't mean it. I'm just — tired, I think, to-night. I shall be all right in the morning. Sleep well, *ma bien chère.*"

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE last day of the old life for Isoël broke fair and sunny and brought with it the reaction from the depression over-night. Brought, too, a slight sense of shame — as morning so often does — for lack of faith in a world so fresh and alive with possibilities.

Of the two girls Patty seemed the most shaken by the fears piled up in the dark night. For she had not the other's temperament, swinging easily to extremes. She did not feel so intensely — the heritage of the artistic — and although she might not know their despair she could never share in their raptures.

Isoël, refreshed by sleep, believed she had passed the Rubicon in her confession overnight. Even Patty had been brought to see the wisdom of her decision! The sight of the bare shabby room with its litter of supper, still uncleared, was like some nightmare of the past. Never could she return to this. And somewhere Francis was awake, thinking of her, deeply in love, counting the hours before they should meet. To-morrow she would be his wife!

Patty made her a cup of tea. Rather silent and dishevelled she bent over the gas-ring, an anxious eye on the kettle.

But Isoël hummed whilst she dressed, a faint smile on her lips as she recalled the words of the song. Not for her the fate of Ninon — "*Toi qui n'as jamais su l'amour*" — but life at its fullest, wedded love.

She piled up her glossy hair, and patted the little curls on her cheeks, glowing from the cold water. Tears had not dimmed her wonderful eyes. She looked the picture of youth and health.

"I've bought the most heavenly hat, a big black one, for to-morrow." Her voice thrilled on the word. "It looks so chic, with a coat and skirt of chalk-white cloth and buckskin shoes. A 'symphony in black and white' as Madame Clotilde used to call it. I heard from Anna.

Did I tell you? She wanted me to come back!" Her laugh rang gaily through the room up to the high blackened ceiling. "No more drudgery for me! To twist and turn like a wooden doll. I do want you to see my trousseau. Couldn't you slip round to-night very late and have a gossip? I expect we shall be dining out but you could wait for me in my bedroom, if you didn't mind. It would be lovely."

Patty shook her red head with its crown of curling-pins.

"No." She would not give her reason. She was inclined to be fatalistic and accept her friend's ultimatum but it went sorely against the grain. She felt tired and a little cross.

"Oh, *do*," Isoël pleaded. She began to polish her pink nails from Patty's worn manicure set. "Then, if you don't, I shall come here. I simply refuse to say good-bye until the very last moment. What time can you get back? I could dress early and slip across on some excuse, say, at six."

Patty glanced at her doubtfully.

"Is it wise?"

"Yes, of course! Try and get off from the Stores."

Patty nodded.

"I'll do my best." Her heart was sore. It seemed hard that she should be outside it all. Then she remembered her "Bert." Love did make a difference! Her common sense returned to her. She smiled as she poured out the tea from a cracked brown pot into their cups.

"You'll have to employ me by-and-by as your manicurist." Her pale blue eyes with their sandy lashes were malicious. "Although when we're married, Bert says he won't hear of me doing work."

Isoël coloured. She understood the distinction that Patty drew in the lives that lay before them.

The good-natured girl laughed as she came across with the cup.

"Don't look so worried, child. I'm not a fool! I understand. So long as we meet now and then it's all that your old Patty asks for."

"*Don't!*" Isoël turned and kissed her. "Listen! I've got a lovely plan. I shall run up to London by my-

self and we'll have a little spree together. Do the theatres — Bert shall come." This suggestion cost her an effort. "And then I'll help you with your trousseau. Do let me? It *would* be fun."

Patty was mollified.

"Perhaps Mr. Doran won't spare you? He seems to have a will of his own."

"Thank goodness!" Isoël laughed. "I'd hate a man who gave in to me. I mean on all and every occasion."

"Where do you go for your honeymoon?" Patty was gulping down her tea and dressing at the same time, an anxious eye on the clock.

Isoël looked away.

"It's not quite settled yet."

She could not tell this loving friend that she had welcomed Doran's suggestion of spending it at the little house tucked away in Holly Walk. For she dared not invite Patty there.

"Perhaps Brighton," she added quickly.

So soon as the words had passed her lips she regretted them. Another fib! Well, it should be the very last. She began to pin on her hat.

"You like the petticoat I brought you?"

"It's lovely." Patty had received the gift from Paris overnight. "I mean to keep it for *the* day."

"But you can't," laughed Isoël. "It's blue."

"Bert likes blue," said Patty simply, "and bright colours. I'm so glad. I never feel happy in dingy ones." She was buttoning a magenta blouse. "We chose this together." Her eyes were tender.

At last both girls were ready. They parted with a hearty kiss but no allusion to the subject of last night's conversation.

"*Au reevwar!*" Patty waved, "Six o'clock. I'll be back," and clattered down the stone stairs.

Isoël re-entered the room. Her face now was rather thoughtful. She stood for a moment before the mirror. It aroused many memories.

"You helped me," she said to it. "You and Patty have been good friends. I shan't forget." Staring back at her own reflection she felt a shadow of regret steal across her happiness.

But the spring was stirring in her blood; her mood soon changed to one of mischief. She sank down in a low Court curtsy before its faded magnificence.

"And I used to pin a counterpane on to my shoulders!" She laughed aloud. "Now I shall have a proper train and wear my pearls. Oh, he *is* a darling! It's wicked of me to doubt my star. Listen, old mirror: never again! No more futile looking back." She was off, singing, down the stairs.

A cool and dignified Isoël Dark walked into the big hotel and found her way into breakfast. She was greeted by an attentive waiter and enjoyed to the full a leisurely meal. From this she wandered through the lounge and paused at the little book-stall above to buy herself a morning paper.

Armed with this she went up to her room. The chamber-maid was making her bed.

Isoël greeted her pleasantly.

"Don't stop. I'm going out. I only want to pin my veil. I've had such a lovely walk. Isn't it a perfect morning?"

The chambermaid agreed that the weather was "improving at last" and adding, smiling, that not many ladies cared to be up and dressed at this hour.

"And I've had breakfast," Isoël laughed. "You see I'm just back from abroad and one does get up early there."

A bell sounded close to her elbow.

"The telephone, madam." The maid retired discreetly, closing the door with a click as a proof that she scorned to listen.

"Is that Miss Dark?" Doran's voice replied to the girl's quick "Hullo!"

"Yes, *moi-même. C'est toi, mon ami?*"

"Don't you dare talk French to me or I'll pay you out in Italian! How are you, Golden Vision?"

"Splendid. I've been for a ta-ta."

"Alone, I hope?"

"No, with the Buttons! The littlest one, like a robin."

"I'll spank him when I come round!" Doran, too,

sounded joyous. "Look here, my dear, I'm rather bothered. The lawyers want to see me again and heaven knows how long they'll keep me. Can you amuse yourself till lunch?"

"Of course. I shall have a look at the shops."

"Well, it's like this — I'm frightfully sorry — but I've had a line from my Colonel too. He's back, wounded, from the front and he asks me to look him up at twelve at a hospital miles from you. Could you meet me at the *Berkeley* — the Dover Street entrance — at one o'clock? There's a nice little hall just inside in case I'm a few minutes late. I'll ring up and secure a table. Afterwards we'll have the car and run down to Holly Walk."

"That would be lovely," she answered sweetly. "And don't rush. I can easily wait. I always love watching the people."

"Don't let any one kidnap you!" She heard him chuckle and smiled herself. "I say — don't go! — would you like the car this morning?" His voice held a grudging note.

"No, I want to see it with you for the first time." She guessed his thoughts. "I can't kiss it outside the Berkeley, can I?"

"Not exactly! Better keep that for me, later on at Holly Walk. Have you had breakfast?"

"*Bien sûr!*"

Back came a volley of Italian and his boyish laugh. Then, more seriously:

"Bless you, take care of yourself! I feel badly cheated this morning." The telephone was rung off.

The little talk left her happy. She moved across to the window and looked out dreamily. Her room was on a high floor. She could see a vast panorama of roofs stretched out before her; the big dome of the British Museum and the spires of the many churches, hazily grey in the early light, and a queer disconnected building with jutting gables that straggled away to her right like a child's erection of bricks. Below her were the Square gardens, the trees bursting into green and the rather dingy London grass with its winding gravel paths.

It looked forlorn and deserted, a meeting-place for prowling cats and as though each sooty plant and bush faced decay but struggled on.

Suddenly a thought struck her. Beyond this was Churton Square. She would go and thank Sir Abel Groot. Her eyes fell on the telephone.

"I'll ring him up — what fun! I believe the number's on his letter."

She unlocked her famous dressing-bag and hunted for it, then paused for a moment to glance down the written page. "You don't tell me the lucky man's name," caught her attention and she smiled.

"I will, now," she decided and turned to the instrument.

The secretary answered the call.

Yes, Sir Abel was at home. He would be pleased to see Miss Dark at any time before twelve. After that he had an appointment.

Isoël put back the receiver. She decided to change her dress.

"He shall see the difference in me," she thought, "and I shall be ready for lunch too."

Behold her then, a little later, dainty, demure, in dove-grey, with a wide-brimmed hat in lapis-blue shading her eyes; round her neck the famous pearls, on her finger the emerald ring making a hillock in her glove, grey too, reminiscent of Tory.

The sunshade was blue to match. Little grey shoes and stockings gave the finish she prized so highly. The porter bowed as he let her out.

A fat, bloated London pigeon, strutting along in the gutter, perched his head on one side and peered at her with pink eyes that gave him a dissipated look.

"*Some* bird!" he seemed to say, "Not unlike my class."

The sight of him brought back to the girl the whirl of wings about St.. Mark's. The skies were not so blue in London but the great city called to her with its old hidden fascination; that sense of solidity and calm which broods under the froth of life churning away on its surface. It counted in centuries, not in days.

"I am London, and I last." This was the message that swept to her across its time-stained treasure-house, the solemn, gloomy old museum. "Wars come and wars go. Little men and great men fight, and fret, and fade away. I remain, I am Britain."

"And I love you," said Isoël softly. "Better now than the South. I had to go away to miss you, but I'm home again, and I'm glad."

She paused for a moment to watch a small, intensely-alive errand-boy fling back a quick retort to a grimy cook, arms a-kimbo, scowling over an area gate.

"G'arn! 'Oo d'you tike me for? I'm h'off to jine the h'Army!"

He caught Isoël's merry glance and winked at her shamelessly.

"Not 'arf!" Which, rightly, she took to be a tribute to her beauty.

Then, with a whoop, he was off, swinging his basket, his floppy cap, with the peak carefully pulled down behind, revealing a fringe of dust-coloured hair.

"I even prefer him to gondoliers," Isoël decided, smiling. "I think at a pinch he'd be more honest. Dear old London!" She walked on proudly.

The thin, supercilious footman let her in at No. 5. She was shown up into the library on the first floor without delay.

Sir Abel rose from his writing-table, gouty no longer, very dapper, with his full lips curled in a smile, mischief in the ferrety eyes.

"How are you? You look — superb!" The tribute held a grain of malice.

"I'm very well, though I crossed last night in a frightful gale." She sat down in the arm-chair offered her, cool and composed. "And you?"

"Middling." He drew up another seat a foot from her own and scrutinized her pretty clothes.

"Paris?" His voice was slightly familiar.

She nodded her head.

"Thanks to your kindness in getting my money out of the bank. I hope —"

Sir Abel interrupted.

"I've had that put all right for you. There's still a

deposit — the interest. You never had your book made up. You should send it in once a year."

"Something more to thank you for." Isoël smiled at him. "I'm very grateful. That was why I rang you up. I felt I *must* come round and see you and tell you so instead of writing."

"Kind of you," said Sir Abel. The eyes, sunk in their pouches, twinkled. "I thought you came for that wedding present I promised you. Who's the man?"

"Did you promise me one?" She laughed. "It was surely a little premature."

"Not at all. I knew you'd win. So the great adventure came off?"

She evaded his meaning, her head high.

"My trip to Venice? It certainly did. I've had a perfectly heavenly time."

"And now you're back on earth again, caught up in the toils of marriage?"

"Yes, to-morrow," she said demurely.

"Soon as that?" He raised his brows. "But you'd never let the grass grow long under your feet — those pretty feet!" He stared at them and gave a chuckle. "I think you might trust me with his name?"

"It's Sam — Sam Jones. He sells butter." She rejoiced in his stare and added, "retail."

"And he gave you those pearls," said Sir Abel suavely. "Sure it's not margarine?"

Isoël's smothered laughter escaped.

"It's no good trying to deceive you! I'm going to marry a Mr. Doran. A V.C.— isn't that nice? He's a barrister but fighting now — at least he was before he was wounded — and he's just got a home appointment as adjutant in a northern camp. That's why it's such a hurried affair."

"I accept your explanation," he laughed. "You've a sound head on your young shoulders. He's well off, I presume. Those pearls cost something."

"We shall be quite comfortable. About fifteen thousand a year." Her face was delicious in its mischief.

Sir Abel gave a startled grunt.

"H'm! I should think you would. Better than being at Clotilde's, eh?"

"I can still go there." Her eyes danced. "I had a letter inviting me back."

"And what does Mr. Dawn say to that proposition?"

He leaned nearer, aware of a slight change in her.

"So he doesn't know everything? Another wise move of yours."

She did not reply to this and somehow she did not like his approval.

"His name is Doran, not Dawn. His mother was Lady Caroline Doran. She was a daughter of Lord Garth."

"Ho, ho!" He laughed aloud. "I've heard of her." He paused for a moment, reviving scandalous memories. Then he started.

"Why, that's odd! He must be a son of David Doran. I've a fine landscape of his downstairs. I'll show it you before you go." His face lit up as he spoke of his hobby; became, in some way, purified. It appealed to the highest side of his nature. The look passed and he went on, "I suppose the money comes from her?" He had not doubted the girl's statement.

"Yes, and the place in Dorsetshire." How proud she felt at this moment. She liked and yet mistrusted Sir Abel. Now she was getting her own back.

"And the pearls?"

"No." Her head went higher. "Those we bought together in Paris."

"Wise again." His voice grated. He tapped her familiarly on the arm. "Good jewels are always an asset. A man rarely asks for them back."

"What do you mean?" She looked bewildered and drew away under his touch.

"You never know—" He watched her closely. "Have you got a settlement?"

"I think so."

"Find out. *Before* to-morrow! There's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip—even prettier ones than yours!" He gave his harsh, suppressed laugh. "Is he fairly young?"

"Yes, of course. I told you that he was in the army—had got his commission, and a V.C. Oh!" She recoiled, the colour flooding her delicate face. "You thought he

was an old man? That I was marrying him for his money!"

"Why not?" Sir Abel roared.

Her indignation grew apace. He went on, curious now.

"You wouldn't marry a man like me, for instance, if I gave you the chance?"

"No, I *wouldn't!*" she cried hotly, anger mastering her politeness.

"And quite right!" laughed Sir Abel. He was not in the least offended by it.

But his manner towards her altered a little. It became more fatherly.

"Now, look here, Miss Dark, I'm going to give you a word of advice. You're fond of Doran?"

He watched her shrewdly.

"Yes." Her voice was indistinct.

"As fond as that?" His eyes narrowed. "It's the worst thing that could have happened."

"Why?" She stared at him, amazed.

"Because when a woman is deeply in love she throws her caution overboard. I gather from something you said just now he doesn't know your history?"

She hesitated.

"Only — a little."

"And quite enough," said Sir Abel grimly. "Don't go telling him anything more. He takes you on his own valuation. *Your* affair is to keep up the price."

Isoël's face was hurt and wistful. Her indignation had melted away. She was back at the old bitter problem.

"You're a pretty woman," Sir Abel continued, "and a clever one — when you keep your head. Don't let your heart interfere. *After* marriage you mayn't find that a man is quite so tractable. Don't give him any hold on you. Is there any one who can give you away? I don't mean in Church." He chuckled here. "But about your life up to now?"

"No, I've never made friends. Only one — the girl I lived with."

"Then drop her. Effectually, but not in a way that will leave rancour."

Isoël writhed in her chair.

"I can't. She's safe — and she understands."

"She's a danger-mark," said the shrewd old man. "But not so dangerous as yourself! One of these days" — he raised a finger with swollen joints and shook it at her — "you'll succumb to the greatest folly on earth of which a woman is capable. I'm not certain it's not a disease connected with hysteria. The name it goes by is 'Confession.'"

He let the words sink in.

Isoël raised her sombre eyes.

"Why shouldn't I tell him everything? I've done nothing I'm ashamed of."

His cynical advice had succeeded where all poor Patty's honest protests had fallen upon barren ground He had touched, not her principles, but her pride.

"Because it's too late," said Sir Abel firmly. "You should have done it at the start. He'd never believe in you again — not if he's his father's son. David Doran trusted his wife when all the world guessed the truth — that she had become the Prince's mistress. She confessed one night and they parted. She did it, you see, a trifle too late."

A cold shiver ran through the girl.

"Why do you tell me all this?" she cried.

"Because,"— Sir Abel's eyes shifted — "I happen to like you." His voice was gruff. "I'm what is known as a self-made man. There are plenty of us knocking about, but few women with the brains and grit to succeed in a similar fashion. You could do it. You've got the strength — and the weaknesses — of the two classes and, if I'm not much mistaken, a dash of the cleverest blood in the world — Jewish. It's worth a royal ransom!" He chuckled. "But don't make a blunder now. If you do,"— he rose to his feet — "come to me. I'll help you again. I mean that — in honest friendship."

He stood with his back to the mantelpiece looking down at the silent figure.

"One thing more. Does Doran know that you and I are acquainted?"

"No." She felt slightly ashamed. She had cause to be grateful to this man.

"Then don't mention it," said Sir Abel. "That's why"

— his lips curled, humorous and cynical —" I'm not going to give you that wedding-present. I'm going back on my promised word — *foi d'un financier!*"

The way he said it was so quaint, so kindly beneath the open sneer, that the girl forgave him his harsh advice. She knew in her heart that his logic was sound and that he meant well by her.

"You're very good to me," she cried. "I *am* grateful. Please believe it." She sprang up impulsively and held out her hands to him. Tears were standing in her eyes, hitherto veiled by her lashes.

"Then you'll come to me if there's any trouble?"

"Yes. You, first of all!"

"Good. But if you're a sensible girl, there won't be any. Now sit down and tell me the whole adventure. I've just ten minutes more free and then I'm off to a Board Meeting."

She obeyed him willingly. Sir Abel listened, amused and friendly. It strengthened him in his opinion. Doran was not the man to be played with.

He would not look too far ahead. This war brought many widows, and the girl was clever, undoubtedly! And fascinating.

He did not refer to his earlier subject until they stood in the hall on the shabby Persian rug that had cost him a little fortune. Then he played his last card.

"The worst of that folly I described is it generally ruins *two* lives. Good-bye. Good luck to you!"

He left her to the footman's attentions, in his old abrupt careless manner, and turned into the dining-room.

"That ought to settle it. She's head over ears in love with the fellow! I think I deserve a glass of port —"

He went up to the sideboard, measured it out lovingly, and held it up to the light.

"Another danger lamp," he chuckled. "Gout! I'll risk it, just for once! That's a good girl — straight as a die. I almost wish —"

He drank slowly.

CHAPTER XXIX

"WE have to get out here," said Doran, as they drew up at an opening in the long busy line of shops. "We don't boast a carriage road."

They dismissed the car until six o'clock and turned up the paved passage guarded by a pair of posts. It widened as they moved along, with a high wall on their right and facing it were little houses with narrow, grimy strips of garden.

"This is the ugly part," said Doran, "which an amusing friend of my father's used to call 'the scrag end'! Ahead of us lies the country." He quickened his steps instinctively.

Isoël smiled and slipped a hand through his arm.

"I'm frightfully excited! Ever since you told me about it, that night we first went to the Lido, I've longed to see your old home."

"I hope you won't be disappointed. I think it's rather selfish of me to bring you back here to-morrow. But then we've only a few days and it seems a shame to waste them in journeys."

"I'd rather come here than anywhere else." She meant it honestly. Only a few months ago she would have scorned the bare idea of a honeymoon spent in a cottage a few yards from the Fulham Road. But love had changed her point of view. A thought struck her. "What servants have you?"

"A man and his wife — we've had them for years — and a small girl who keeps in the background, a sort of parasite of Biddy's. The old couple are great sport. They generally call me 'Master Francis' and Biddy reads me a fine lecture when I come in with muddy boots. Her joy in life is a grey parrot who uses most appalling language; a sort of curse and blessing combined. She spends her evenings reforming him. Robert is an old sailor. His great hobby is the garden. They run the whole place between them. I never interfere."

"I hope they'll take to me," said the girl.

Doran laughed.

"You needn't worry! Old Biddy's been after me for years to 'marry and settle' as she puts it. Now, look, isn't this better?"

They had passed the back of a block of flats, high and gloomy, and turned the corner. A sense of light and open air rewarded them; for the narrow walk was now between low walls, the boundary of back gardens. Trees in their delicate young green peered over, laburnum and lilac, with a fringe of pale yellow blossom or the heavier purple spikes. Painted doors of faded hue broke the line of old bricks, always a lovely note in London amidst stucco and dirty stone, and the path was so narrow that none of the houses facing the adjacent streets were visible, only the clear blue sky with its fleecy clouds, like a flock of sheep.

"We might be in the heart of the country, a little lane in a village." Isoël's eyes drank it in. "I know I'm going to love this place. I'm longing to get round the corner."

For Holly Walk had abrupt turnings and one of these was just ahead. When they reached it she gave a cry.

"Is that the house?"

Doran nodded.

A low, white building stood alone, plumb with the pavement, bathed in sunshine. Brown tiles and latticed windows veiled by deep blue artist blinds gave it a homely and picturesque air.

It seemed to be calmly waiting for them.

Doran hunted for his latch-key whilst Isoël stood and gazed up at the door with its striped linen curtain and a brass bowl in one of the windows holding a pot of hyacinths.

"Hadn't we better ring?" she suggested. "I'm sure old Biddy would prefer it." Inexperienced as a mistress, inwardly she was dreading the servants. "But everything's excused in a bride," she thought with a feeling of consolation.

"Lord, no! She's expecting you."

Doran ran up the steps and opened the door. Isoël followed.

"Welcome home!" He bent and kissed her.

A crisp rustle brought them apart. A little old woman with red cheeks stood at the top of the kitchen stairs, beaming at the young couple, indiscreet and unashamed.

"Here she is!" Doran laughed.

Isoël, shyly, held out her hand. Biddy had prepared her speech.

"Good evening, miss — pleased to see you. It's a happy day for me and mine as always holds that a gentleman isn't complete until he's married." Her small bright eyes were inquisitive. "There! Isn't she a picture?" She forsook her original oration and turned to her master; then glanced at his boots. "I do 'ope, Master Francis, as you've wiped your feet? With all this dust — and I've only just gone over the floor. Seems to come in through the cracks, enough to make a body crazy!"

"But it's all so spotless!" Isoël smiled, enchanted with the narrow hall, tiled in red and the white walls lined with innumerable water-colours. Through an open door she could catch a glimpse of the dining-room, the oak table laid for tea with old china and heavy, well-polished silver. "I think it's *ducky!*" The words broke from her lips impulsively.

Biddy beamed.

"We've done our best, Robert and me, but the master gave us scant notice. Gentlemen think that a spring-cleaning can be got through in a day."

"I'll take you round, now," said Doran, cutting short the interview. "Come along!" He began to mount the narrow staircase, oak-railed. "I'd better go first and show you the way."

Biddy lingered. Isoël, moved by a wish to please the old woman gave her little grey shoes another rub on the mat.

"I'm tidy, too, you see." She nodded her head at the watchful servant.

"Then you'll have to keep an eye on *him*," Biddy remarked confidentially. "The times I've had with him as a boy!" She chuckled as she disappeared.

"She'll *do*," she informed Robert, anxious for the first news.

Meanwhile her new mistress was exploring her domain.

The house bore traces at every turn of having been arranged by men with a view to comfort and to space; rather bare, but the furniture mostly antique, some of it good, all of it efficient and solid. Yet the whole was saved from ugliness by the painter's eye for colour and form. In the bath-room, built out over the kitchen, unduly large in proportion to the rest of the place, by the side window were parallel bars, worn and polished by constant use.

"I'll teach you some tricks on those," Doran solemnly volunteered. "I should think, too, you ought to fence. A good eye and quick on your feet. Come and look at the garden, old lady. Mind your hat!"

She leaned out. Below her was a triangular court, paved with uneven stones, with rock-plants set in the cracks and a couple of time-worn marble statues. In the centre was a mulberry-tree in a little patch of dark soil edged with some old Persian tiles, a happy touch of vivid blue.

It was evident that a part of the garden had been stolen originally from those around it, the shape due to a sharp angle formed by a square in the vicinity. One side of it had been sacrificed to building out the studio but sufficient open space remained to secure the effect of privacy suggesting a country cottage.

Beyond the stretch of irregular paving was a wide bed filled with plants in various stages of budding green.

"That's Robert's herbaceous border, with everything hardy that grows in London. There's a bed of lilies in that corner and those little trees along the wall are almond. They've been a mass of bloom," Doran explained eagerly. "We tried roses — a hopeless failure! They can't survive the fogs and dirt. 'Round at the back of the studio is Biddy's garden, a tiny strip with mint and parsley and just beyond are the dogs' graves. I must show you those. My father carved one of the tombstones with the head of 'Judy' in bas-relief, a cocker spaniel we loved dearly and called after Miss Dalgleish. Like it all?"

Isoël nodded.

"I think it's perfect! I only wish we could stay here altogether."

"Oh, we'll come back." His voice was cheerful. "Now for the best room of all!"

They went downstairs and along a passage that connected the house with the studio. Doran stood back to let her pass, then followed eagerly to watch the girl's first impression. For here, since inheriting his money, he had given vent to his fancy, guided by his father's taste. They had spent many a happy hour searching and bargaining for its treasures.

The fine proportions of the room, built long before their time, lent themselves to a mellow scheme of early-Italian decoration. Beautiful hangings in needlework, rare old Florentine wedding-chests, Majolica and ancient bronzes were scattered about lavishly, yet in no way obtruding upon the sense of space or interfering with the crowded pictures on the walls.

Many of these were of Venice, painted by the dead man and full of the luminous atmosphere suggesting an opal, that Isoël knew. It seemed to transport her suddenly to that land of dazzling sun and sky, where love had first dawned for her; to that early morning when she stood beneath *Fortuna* on her globe and gazed across to the sparkling Molo.

"Oh, Francis!" Her eyes shone. "It's like some golden dream come true. I shall never miss Venice here."

"Dearest." He was touched and happy, "I thought, somehow, you'd like this room." Then in silence he drew her down to the deep fire-place at the end set with old Abruzzi tiles. He raised his eyes to the portrait above it. "That's my father." His voice was low, full of pride and wistfulness.

She leaned up against his shoulder and together they gazed at the fine old face with its wide grey eyes, under shaggy brows, so like the son's, yet more absorbed — the eyes of a man who saw visions. The mouth, too, was different. Pain had touched and purified the strong, fully-developed lips but left no trace of bitterness. It testified to a character noble and rare that thanked God for the best in life and bowed its head to the worst, humble but uncrushed.

"The straightest man that ever breathed," Doran said suddenly. "How he would have loved *you!*"

Isoël shrank back.

"No!" She covered her face with her hands to blot out those grey eyes that followed her from the picture. The speech had broken through her guard.

"My dear!" Doran looked amazed.

"It's true!" She threw out nervous hands to ward him off as he approached. "Don't touch me! I can't bear it!" She seemed almost hysterical.

"*Isoël?*"

"*Non, non, je ne veux pas!* If you knew—"

He tried to take her in his arms. But quickly, like a creature trapped, she slipped away and placed herself out of his reach, with a writing-table blocking his path effectually.

Light came suddenly to the man. She had gone back to the past, to the disgrace surrounding her birth. The contrast between Gervase Dark and his own parent had been bitter. He answered her very gently.

"I do. I know everything."

She gave a quick, painful gasp.

"Darling, don't look like that. You mustn't exaggerate the trouble. Your father's not the only man who's been obliged to leave the Service."

"Oh!" She clasped her hands to her breast. "But that's not all. If only it were!"

For now she knew that it was upon her, the darkest hour of her life. She loved him too dearly to marry him, leaving him in ignorance.

"No?" Doran's eyes grew eager. She was going to speak of her life at Clotilde's, so he thought. He welcomed the notion. He had never loved and respected her more than he did at this moment. "Tell me, then."

He could have spared her this confession, but he scorned the idea. Let her speak. She should never guess that he'd held her secret all these long happy weeks.

"I'm not what you think me." She stood there tense in every line of her young figure, fighting for courage, white as marble, her sombre eyes fixed on Doran. "I've deceived you." She choked on the word. "I loved you too much at the last. I was afraid of telling you — that you might turn away from me."

"Never! Nothing could make me do that."

He spoke firmly but lovingly, and she went on, in her tragic voice:

"I've been — a shop-girl, and — a servant!"

It was typical of her temperament that she used the strongest terms she could find. Doran's heart bled for her. He coupled the two statements together as a part of her nervous exaggeration.

A "servant" of Clotilde's? Certainly — if she chose to put it in that way.

"Well —" he smiled — "what of that? I suppose you mean you've worked for your living. It doesn't make you less of a lady. I wish you'd come out of that dark corner and talk things over comfortably."

"No. I must tell you everything now." A calm, bred of sheer despair, was succeeding her first mood of terror. "Please stay there. You don't understand. I've been a *mannequin* at Clotilde's and before that I was a maid. Lady Manister employed me. She's dead now. I was there four years. My mother was not in your class. She lived in a hotel-restaurant at Monaco with her mother's father who owned the place — a French Jew. *My* father met her there. He was —" she faltered — "a gentleman, *once*. But he came to grief. Afterwards, when I was twelve, he deserted us."

She paused for breath. Doran's expression had changed. Now, he looked older, a trifle hard and incredulous.

"Wait a minute. I always thought that Lady Manister was your cousin?"

"I never told you so," she cried. Her lips quivered. "Did Judy?" Here was her lie come home to roost.

"Yes. She said she had it from you. Perhaps —" he would give her every chance — "she misunderstood you in some way?"

"No." She gripped the table before her. "I gave her a false impression." She would not stoop to excuse herself though she read the verdict in Doran's eyes.

"I see." He tried to make his voice non-committal but he failed.

No man, however loving, cares to feel he has been

fooled. It had been a sharp shock to him to learn the truth about her birth. A French Jew who kept an inn? Maid to Lady Manister? But nothing had hurt him so much as this, her acknowledged lie to Judy Dalgleish. All his old doubts rose up, he felt his confidence impaired.

Yet she remained the love of his life. Pity and passion strove with his judgment.

"Why do you tell me all this now, and not before?" he asked bravely. "Couldn't you have trusted me?" His eyes were full of the pain he felt. As she did not answer him he insisted. "Why *now?*"

A sob broke from her.

"Because I couldn't go on," she cried. "I love you too much — that's the truth! I thought I could — that anything was better than the risk of parting. But when you spoke about your father,"— she threw out her hands despairingly —"it was like a dagger in my heart. *Mon Dieu, mon Dieu!*" She slipped down on to her knees, her head bowed upon her arms, broken at last.

Doran forced his way to her side.

"For God's sake!" His love had conquered. "Isoël, look at me. Speak to me. What does it matter? Do you think I care who your people were? If you'd swept crossings it's all the same! You're the woman I love — mine — *mine!*"

He held her fiercely, her warm body crushed against him. It fired his blood. He gave the table a mighty shove that sent it grinding across the floor, a statuette crashing down, books scattering right and left.

"There! Now we've space to breathe. Kiss me!" His mouth closed on hers, salt with her bitter tears.

Passion, the sister-spirit of Sorrow, swept them together. She clung to him, crying and laughing, incoherent.

"Forgiven? No, I can't believe it. It's a dream — I shall wake — all alone!"

"Not after to-morrow," he whispered. "Did you think I'd ever let you go? You, with your hair" — his hand caressed it — "and your beautiful sad Jewish eyes. That's the Eastern part of you. It's puzzled me, but

now I know. You'll never have any more secrets from me? Swear it?" His voice was masterful.

"Never!" She felt his grip relax and drew away to glance at his face. For a long moment they gazed at each other, striving to part the veil that lies, intangible yet menacing, between individual souls, the secret of human loneliness.

Then as she realized the strength of his firm mouth and the steady purpose of the grey eyes alight with love, she felt again a passing qualm.

"You're *certain,* Francis?" Her voice shook. "There'll be no regrets — afterwards? There will never come a day when you'll think that you acted against your better judgment?"

He looked back fearlessly, sure of himself, with a faint smile.

"No. I take you as I find you, loving you with all my heart. But I'm going to be honest with you, sweet. I hate the thought of your lie to Judy, that's the one thing that rankles. But we'll wipe it out; we won't look back. I shall never speak of it again. As to Clotilde and your father it doesn't count with me *that!*" He snapped his fingers contemptuously. "I dare say he had his good points and he's dead now, poor chap."

Isoël shivered. For a moment she wondered if it were due to the man before her to add the sequel. Then she remembered Patty's counsel. It was her father's secret as well.

"There's one thing more," said Doran gently, "that puzzles me. Shall I tell you?"

"Yes." She waited, inwardly nervous.

"I've always thought that Lady Manister provided for you after her death. I don't know why, except that it seemed natural in an old cousin with whom you had lived since your childhood. Did she by any chance?"

"Oh, no! She left me nothing." Isoël's face had cleared again. "You see, she died suddenly and she'd been very good to me, helped me with my education. She arranged all that with my mother. But I had to earn my own living. That's why I went to Clotilde's."

"Of course. Jolly plucky of you." He smiled at her

but his eyes were thoughtful. "Then what made you go to Venice?"

She did not understand that he meant, but did not like to ask outright, how she had managed to afford it. She answered him literally.

"I've always longed to see the world. And Italy — of all places! I've dreamed of it night after night in the room that I shared with Patty. I told you"— her cheeks flushed —"that I had a flat, but it wasn't quite true. A working-girl can't afford such luxuries. We lived in one big room, overlooking the railway line and I used to watch the trains roar past and picture myself in a carriage speeding out to the coast and the sea, away on some great adventure. Even last night I got up for another look at the sparks in the smoke and thought of you in Holly Walk."

"Last night?" He stared at her.

Isoël bit her lip.

"Yes. I went there after you left. I'd promised Patty —" She stopped abruptly, seeing the pitfall under her feet. "That's the friend I told you about. She's back again in London now, and she wanted to see me —" Her voice trailed off.

Doran nodded silently. He did not like this nocturnal adventure. He had left the girl so trustfully in the hall at the *Russell*. Was there no end to this web of deceit?

Isoël mustered her failing courage.

"Is that all that's worrying you?"

"No." He decided to have it out. "I can understand that you fancied Venice, but — dear, forgive me, I don't want to pry into your affairs — wasn't it beyond your means?"

She looked down, avoiding his glance. A sudden new fear possessed her. She remembered Sir Abel's firm advice. "Don't let him know that we're acquainted." And here, where she might have been so candid, she temporized.

"Oh, I see! An old friend gave me the tickets." She faltered, adding, "and fifty pounds. That's what made it possible."

Doran's eyes searched her face. It sounded lame and his heart sank.

"Generous of her." His voice was dry.

Bravely she corrected him.

"It was a man. I'd done him a service and his gratitude took this form."

"A *man?*" He spoke rather sharply.

"Yes." She resented the change in him, which she felt with the instinct of love. She decided to speak openly. "A rich man, Sir Abel Groot."

At the mention of the name Doran started. He had not yet forgotten the incident of the cheque in Paris. His thoughts whirled on. It had reached her at the end of her visit to Italy and before this she had received fifty pounds. A lavish sum, all told, to give out of "gratitude"?

Sir Abel Groot. The added title released the spring of memory. The South African millionaire. Of course! He felt an instinctive recoil. For Sir Abel bore the reputation of sailing uncommonly close to the wind in some of his earlier speculations. There was that famous company which had risen up like a bubble, and broken, leaving in its wake an eddy of despairing victims. Later Sir Abel had subscribed heavily to party funds and had found himself in due course the recipient of Birthday Honours.

What could a man of this description have in common with Isoël.

It roused her lover's jealousy; he hated the bare thought of it.

"Another mystery?" he suggested, forcing a smile that touched his lips but was unreflected in his eyes.

Isoël winced. She remembered now Sir Abel's words on the subject; that, if Doran were his father's son, he'd never believe in her again, once he had proved her deception.

Her nerves suddenly gave way. Hysterical anger rose to the surface.

"I suppose you think I'm not to be trusted?" She flung it wildly in his face.

Doran shrank back from her as though she had dealt him an actual blow.

"Isoël! That's not fair." Then he pulled himself together. "How did you come to know this man?"

His tone was harsh and masterful. He was wounded

by her unjust taunt and although he would not condemn her yet and his whole heart cried out against it, he suspected fresh deceit. He was nearing the limit of his patience.

She took it badly. Innocent, she resented his attitude. Her head went up in scornful pride.

"I shan't tell you. You speak as if—" She threw out her hands with a nervous gesture and left it at that, adding coldly, "I suppose I'm allowed my own friends, even if I am engaged. I've never interfered with yours!"

A vision of Tory rose before her as she said the words and her lips curled.

"I don't approve of your friendship with Groot. He's a wrong 'un," said Doran grimly. "I daresay you didn't know it." His jealousy flared out again. "What do you owe him? I'll pay him back."

"*Owe* him?" Her eyes flashed. "Do you think that I would borrow money? He gave it me—it was a present. He's been extremely kind to me."

"I don't doubt it!" Doran sneered unconsciously, driven to bay.

His temper had caught fire from hers. In a moment the atmosphere was changed. They faced each other, oceans apart, each mistrustful and offended.

Doran broke the silence first.

"Now, look here, my dear girl, I don't want to hurt your feelings, but I wish you'd play fair with me. You swore you'd have no further secrets and here we are—at it again! Why do you hold things back from me?"

"It's not that—" Her bosom heaved. She could have explained so easily, but her pride was as obstinate as his. Out of a rising sense of panic she gave a hard little laugh. Patty would have recognized it as the result of strained nerves and that reckless mood which seized the girl face to face with despair.

It completed the disaster; for Doran took it for bravado.

"You think it amusing?" he said slowly. "Well, I don't. I'm not a fool. I hardly suppose that a man like Groot flings his money about for nothing! I don't mean—"

But she caught him up with a gasp of startled indignation.

"Oh! How *dare* you? It's an insult. I'll never forgive you for saying that!" She stamped her foot on the floor. "You judge me by your society friends. I'm not a Mrs. Serocold! I don't ask men to pay my debts." Doran swore under his breath. "I belong to a lower class, I suppose — my mother's class — that *works* for its living, honestly in broad daylight. Because I've told you the whole truth — which you never asked for, remember that — you treat me like an adventuress!"

"*Isoël!*" He caught her wrists.

"Let me go!" She wrenched them away. "It's all over — I've done with you!"

"You're off your head," Doran retorted. "You don't give me time to explain. You twist and turn my words about and hint at things I never meant." His voice was as hot as her own, yet it held a note of apology that might have touched her calmer reason.

But Isoël would not listen. He had suspected her purity. This was the last deadly blow. Never now would she marry him. But through the haze of passionate anger she felt the imperative need to clear her character before they parted. She would not retreat under a cloud.

Her eyes fell on the telephone. It appealed to her love of the dramatic. Sir Abel should prove her innocence. He had promised her his help in trouble.

Without a word she stepped aside, paused to recall the right number and asked for it, through the instrument.

Doran watched her in amazement. What the devil was she up to?

In another moment he understood.

"Is that Sir Abel?" She spoke clearly. Only the Gallic roll of the "r" betrayed her, produced from the throat. Her voice was clear and deadly calm. "*Oui, c'est moi, Isoël Dark.* I want you to tell Mr. Doran"— the listener tried to intervene but she waved him back imperiously —"how we met, the whole story. I'm speaking from Mr. Doran's house. It's a *last* favour I'm asking you."

She caught Sir Abel's surprised grunt, then the familiar grating voice.

"Wait a minute! Tell me more. Only answer 'yes' or 'no'—not a word beyond. You understand? Have you confessed everything?"

"Yes."

"I guessed it. You little fool! Is the engagement broken off?"

"Yes, by me." She heard him chuckle.

"Then I'm not called in as a peacemaker?"

"No. Only to do as I asked. Explain how I came by the tickets and the fifty pounds. That's all." Doran noticed that she did not allude to the cheque in Paris. "At what hour will you be in? . . . Yes, to-day . . . At six o'clock? Thank you—you're very kind. Mr. Doran will come and see you. Good-bye." She rang off.

"I'll be *damned* if I go," said her lover hotly. "Why can't you explain things yourself?"

He was close to her now; from his great height gazing down in her white face. His own was strained. She could have seen had she looked up an agony of love and grief in the grey eyes. But the heavy lids veiled her sight. She lost her last chance of salvation.

"Because you wouldn't believe me," she cried.

Doran, wounded to the quick, gulped down something that rose in his throat.

"I haven't deserved this," he said. "I think, with you, that it's best over."

In silence, he watched her slender hands draw off the shining row of pearls and lay them down on the littered table beside the beautiful emerald ring.

Something snapped in his heart. No woman was worth this pain! He turned and stared out of the window until he heard the door close.

CHAPTER XXX

NEVERTHELESS at six o'clock Doran stood in Churton Square before the door of number five. He had passed through a bitter struggle, yet his sense of justice had prevailed in the end over his stubborn pride. Isoël had called Sir Abel as a witness for her defence and Doran knew that, in his anger and jealousy, he had cast a doubt on the virtue of the girl he loved. He would obey her last request, undignified as his errand appeared, both to himself and to her.

But Hope, that never entirely dies while life remains, was stirring feebly beneath the weight of his despair. He would not admit, even now, that the truth — if Sir Abel Groot vouchsafed it — could alter the fact of their separation, but his love was stunned and not slain and he grasped at the chance of some excuse to reinstate his fallen idol.

The tall footman opened the door and showed the visitor into the room where Isoël had first waited with the famous letter-case.

Doran, too restless to sit down, aware that the hands of the clock were marking five minutes to the hour appointed for the interview, began to study the various pictures, which he saw at once were of great value.

He did not want to think at present of how he should commence proceedings and with an effort he forced his mind into this fresh opening.

At last he came to a narrow canvas that held an oddly familiar note. An ilex tree stood in the foreground of a peaceful scene in the Campagna, veiled by the sadness of the twilight. It was signed with his father's name.

It seemed to the weary, harassed man like a silent message from the dead, a sympathy that reached out across the grave in his hour of despair.

"*He* knew," thought Doran grimly. "Poor old chap! How he suffered."

He was still examining the picture when the door was opened by Sir Abel.

He came forward, very dapper, with a brisk:

"Good morning, Mr. Doran," and went on pleasantly, "I see you've found the little landscape I was hoping to have shown you. It's not in a very good light. One minute!" He turned back and ran his hand down the row of electric switches by the door. "That's better, isn't it?"

The shells shielding the many lamps threw a clear glow on the paintings, leaving the rest of the room as dim as a theatre before the footlights.

Doran felt inwardy relieved by the turn of events, the ice broken so naturally through this reference to his parent.

"Thanks, yes. I can see it well. It's characteristic of my father. He always preferred simple subjects."

Sir Abel was standing now by his side, his pointed beard thrust forward, ferrety eyes half-closed as he followed his companion's glance.

"A fine artist," he said suavely. "He deserved to be more widely known. I should like to secure more of his work." Doran did not take the hint. Sir Abel continued, with a smile, "I suppose you're not inclined to part with one or two of his smaller pictures?"

"I'm afraid not." Doran frowned. He had a sudden nervous instinct that Groot was laughing in his sleeve; a true one, as it happened. Suavity was a bad sign where Sir Abel was concerned.

"You're wise," said that gentleman. "Fashion in art's an uncertain thing, but I think there will be a market for them in a few years' time. It's a case where business and sentiment meet."

It was said with a flattering intonation that shielded the speech from open offence. But Doran sensed that insolence which was a part of the man's nature.

He fidgeted, anxious now to get to the object of his visit. Sir Abel gave him no chance.

"This Claude here," he moved lower. "It has a curious history. Perhaps it would interest you?"

Doran saw that it was useless to expect him to take the initiative.

"I'm afraid I'm rather pressed for time." He turned his back on the wall and glanced up at the clock. "Per-

haps you would be kind enough to explain what I called about?"

"Ah! There you have the advantage." Sir Abel drew forward a chair. "Won't you sit down? The fact is I hardly understood the message I received from Miss Dark this afternoon. No doubt you can make it plain?" His voice was callous and amused.

Doran ignored the proffered seat and plunged abruptly into the subject.

"Miss Dark asked me to come and see you. It's a trifle difficult to explain, but I understand"—he hesitated—"that you were kind enough to assist my fiancée materially, some weeks ago, in the matter of tickets and —er—expenses incurred by her in her visit to Venice. I should like you to realize, Sir Abel, that I did not ask for this interview nor wish to trouble you in the matter. Naturally I should have preferred to hear the details from Miss Dark—but she arranged otherwise." He broke off, stammering a little.

Sir Abel did not help him out.

"What does she wish me to tell you?" He gave the young man a shrewd glance and settled himself in an arm-chair.

Doran stood with his back to the fire-place.

"She asks you to confirm her statement that your generosity was the result of gratitude for some service she rendered and to tell me exactly what transpired."

He might have been holding a court-martial. Sir Abel's near-set eyes twinkled.

"I see." He drew out a case of cigars and offered one to the soldier. "Do you smoke?"

Doran shook his head.

"No, thanks. Not now."

He resented the other's attitude. For Groot was smiling to himself, master of the situation. In the shaded light his pointed face with its fleshy lips suggested a satyr.

Carefully he chose an Havana, pierced the end and lighted it, with shaky hands, swollen by gout.

To Doran he looked indescribably evil. It hardened his heart against the girl.

Sir Abel blew out a coil of smoke.

"Yes." He examined his cigar. "Miss Dark is an interesting study. I expect you found her so yourself?"

Doran's eyes were steely now.

"It's not a point I care to discuss. Miss Dark is my promised wife."

"*Was,*" Sir Abel corrected suavely. Doran made no rejoinder. Sir Abel crossed his thin legs and gazed beyond him into space. "Why didn't she tell you the story herself?"

"She preferred to refer me to you."

"I see no reason," the older man's voice was smooth and ironical, "why you should place faith in my statement any more than you do in hers. That, I presume, was the intention?" Receiving no response to this he went on unperturbed.

"Of course you know her better than I do. At least I hope so!" His full lips twitched. "You've been engaged, I believe, three weeks; whereas I, unluckily, have only seen Miss Dark twice. Once when she returned to me a letter-case that I had lost and to-day when she came in person to thank me for her visit to Italy which was made possible by the reward."

"Reward?" Doran looked up.

"Exactly. Fifty pounds. It was advertised in the morning papers. And very cheap at the price." He drew out from an inside pocket a letter-case, opened it and produced the famous miniature in its closed frame, pressed the spring and showed his guest the contents.

"Those diamonds are valuable — apart from other private matters. You would not suspect me of sentiment" — his voice was cynical and amused —"but for thirty years I've carried this about with me. It's become a habit. I'm not going to trouble you, Mr. Doran, with the love-affairs of my youth. You have your own to cope with now. I gather they'll take you all their time." He shut up the case and put it back.

Doran, surprised and disconcerted, tried to reorganize his attack.

"And the tickets?" He asked after a moment.

"Ah," Sir Abel gave a chuckle. "There we have a fine example of philanthropy closely allied to the parsimony of the Scotch. My mother was a native of Greenock. My

father, I believe, was Dutch. If you're a student of racial factors, this may give you food for thought. Those tickets were bought for my own use. Miss Dark found them with seven pounds and the miniature in the letter-case and returned it intact — resisting temptation!

"Unluckily an attack of gout had rendered me an invalid. The journey, which was for a special object — to attend a sale of pictures in Venice — became an impossibility. In the course of our conversation I discovered that our fair friend was hankering after foreign lands. Travel was the dream of her life. She told me, with a curious candour, that the tickets had taxed her honesty far beyond the diamonds and notes. It gave me a clue to her character. As I said before, she's interesting. A dreamer of dreams." He stroked his beard. "I persuaded her to use the tickets and to accept the reward in order to make the great adventure possible. At first she had refused the money. You may have remarked that she is proud? Peculiarly so. Mixed birth often accentuates this failing. The only stipulation I made was that she should write me her views on Venice." He gave a low malicious chuckle. "I asked her opinion on the pictures. I was more than repaid by her criticisms. I only wish I could publish them. They gave me many happy moments."

Doran could have murdered him. With every word of this careful speech with its undercurrent of mockery he felt that, although the mystery of the girl's journey was explained, her association with this man was a subtle desecration.

Sir Abel watched his stony face.

"You must not think," he added smoothly, "that I do not appreciate your fiancée — your late fiancée I should have said." He paused as he saw his visitor's lips curl with involuntary contempt and his manner changed, harsh and repellent. "Make no mistake, Mr. Doran. I admire and respect Miss Dark. I have known a fair number of women — intimately — in my life and I'm not easily taken in. Miss Dark is a girl in a thousand. But she has the defects of her qualities. Impulsiveness is one of them. If she had taken my advice she would not

stand now in the position of losing all that she prizes in life for a scruple of her conscience."

Doran started and opened his lips to speak, but Sir Abel checked him.

"I warned her as a man of the world that I could not conceive of a greater folly than confession on the eve of marriage of certain facts in her career, concerning her birth and her position, unquestioned and unknown by you. Yet, I understand, she has told you all?"

Doran nodded. His hands were clenched.

"Exactly." Sir Abel's voice rose, insolent and provocative. "I guessed the result of such an action. That you, an average young man, moved by the narrow conventions of caste, would misunderstand not only her motive but the courage and faith which inspired it."

The soldier quivered at the insult. He took a quick step forward.

"You go too far!" His eyes were blazing. "You've overlooked your own share. Damned clever to preach to me, but what about that hundred pounds you sent in a signed cheque to Paris?"

Sir Abel gave a startled grunt.

"Eh, what?"

It seemed to Doran that his straight thrust had gone home. He followed up his advantage.

"Was that philanthropy?" he sneered. "Or kind advice as a 'man of the world'?"

"God bless my soul!" cried Sir Abel. "You're not such a fool as I took you for." Unabashed, he rose to his feet, brushing past the angry man. "Stay here — I'm coming back." He crossed the room, thinking aloud. "At *my* age — and a girl like that!" The door slammed after him.

"*Blast* him!" Doran exploded.

He used a further unprintable term with the vigour which a man acquires in the free converse of the trenches. The sharp outburst relieved his feelings. He passed his hand back over his head, smoothing the thick vigorous hair and tried to collect his scattered wits. "What the deuce is he up to now?" He stared hot-eyed at the silver ship, the centre-piece of the fine old table, taking in every detail sub-consciously with the precision of mo-

ments of tense emotion. So had Isoël gazed at it on the day of her first visit, waiting for Sir Abel's verdict at the hands of the sleek secretary.

Doran was not kept long in doubt.

His host returned, business-like, a thin book in his hand with a brownish paper cover.

"Now, Mr. Doran, look at this?" He opened it at a written page and laid it flat on the table. "You will see here a certain entry — on this side — of a hundred pounds." Doran, inwardly surprised, followed the spatulate pointing finger. "A sum banked by Miss Dark's mother, years ago, for her daughter's *dot*. At our friend's request I withdrew it — observe the date — and sent it to Paris. She needed it for her trousseau." He could not refrain from a touch of malice. "It was spent, I believe, to the uttermost farthing for a 'marriage which will not take place.'"

Doran winced. Sir Abel proceeded.

"Her only friend was out of town and she wrote to me in great haste asking if I could arrange it. To avoid delay I sent her a cheque on my banker in Paris, afterwards deducting the money from her account at this Savings Bank in Soho. You see, I knew that she was to be trusted." He gave his little familiar chuckle. "You can take this pass-book and make inquiries. I meant to return it to her to-day but forgot it until she had left the house." He closed the book and held it out. "A fortunate thing, as it happened. Perhaps you would place it in her hands. I haven't a notion of her address."

Doran's face was a study. Anger, relief and shame succeeded each other in swift waves of expression.

Sir Abel, moved by a finer impulse, turned away rather abruptly. Silence brooded over the room. With a violent effort the soldier broke it.

"I'm much obliged," he jerked out.

"You needn't be," said Sir Abel shortly. He was staring now at himself in the glass over the Adams mantelpiece. "But I hope you're convinced." A kindlier note sounded in his gruff voice. "You're a brave man, Mr. Doran. I know your story, it speaks for itself. But, without wishing to give offence, I suggest that Miss Dark has shown a courage equal to, if not greater than,

yours. She had everything in the world to lose by her honesty, yet she risked it.

"And you don't realize your luck." He shrugged his thin pointed shoulders. "For she proved her love by a cruel test. You've no reason to like me, I'll admit that, but you've no cause to suspect my conduct in this matter. I've been a sound friend to the girl whom I'm still hoping you'll make your wife."

He paused for a moment, his eyes fixed on his reflection in the mirror. Then he gave a harsh laugh.

"Gad, how I envy you your youth! I'd give the last years of my life to stand in your shoes at this minute. And I wouldn't let Isoël Dark slip. She's a good woman, you mark my words. 'Pon my soul, if it comes to that and you throw her over—" His lips twitched. "I'm not too old to marry yet. She shan't go under through your fault."

Doran was moving towards the door. He wheeled round at this remark.

"You seem to think it was by my wish that the engagement was broken off. It was Miss Dark's own desire."

"And doesn't that prove her honesty?" Sir Abel glared at the younger man. "Go to her," he said gruffly. "A pair of fools!"

It was his blessing.

. . . . . .

Doran drew in a deep breath of the evening air as he found himself outside that abhorred house. His brain was still in a whirl. Never had he met a man whom he disliked so intensely.

And yet?

He could not define the thought, but later he came to recognize something that dimly appealed to him in Sir Abel's final attitude.

Meanwhile, still sore and angry, he dismissed the interview from his mind as he strode along the pavement. He needed the whole of his concentration for the task before him. For in his heart was a resurrection of love and longing, his idol back on her pedestal.

Painfully he had misjudged her. He began to see that her strange conduct that afternoon had been the result of her outraged womanly pride. He had struck her in

a vital part, through his ill-considered speech. After the proof she had given him of the strength and purity of her love he had cast a doubt upon her honour. Doran winced at the thought.

For the first time he realized the courage of the young girl in her voluntary confession of the squalid background to her life. She had trusted him to understand her temptation and her victory. But Doran himself had failed her. He cursed his lack of faith and insight.

Now he must prove that his love was as great as her own and accept himself an equal share of humiliation. For the first time in their acquaintance he would come as a suppliant to her feet. It brought him a sudden realization of his attitude during their courtship, the rather exceptionable one of the man who counts on certain victory.

He remembered Sir Abel's scornful speech: "I shouldn't let Isoël Dark slip."

"Nor shall I, by heaven!" swore Doran. He quickened his pace towards the *Russell.*

Arrived at the high balconied building, he made his way through the portals unchallenged, drew out a card and scribbled upon it, then beckoned to a page-boy, the "littlest one" with the bright eyes whom Isoël had named the "Robin."

"Will you take this up to Miss Dark at once, and say I'm in the reading-room?"

The page sadly shook his head. He had admired the pretty girl to an extent which had overthrown his allegiance to an American beauty well known in Cinema circles.

"Miss Dark 'as left, sir," he announced.

"Left?" Doran's face fell.

"Yes, sir. An hour ago." He revelled in the soldier's chagrin. "That's 'it 'im," he said to himself, conscious of a fallen rival.

Doran felt in his pocket and produced a shilling.

"Do you know where she's gone?"

"No, sir." The Robin became eager to help. Cupidity warred with his youthful jealousy. "But she *may* 'ave left a message, sir. At the h'office. Shall I h'ask?"

"No." Doran tossed him the coin and made his way there himself.

But his careful inquiries elicited little help in this quarter.

The lady had given no address. She had seemed to be in a great hurry, had paid her account and driven off in a taxi with her luggage. The book-keeper was rather short. It was close upon her dinner-hour.

Doran was forced to beat a retreat. He tried to resist the sense of panic that threatened him. Isoël lost, swallowed up in this great city? Impossible! He *must* find her.

He went out down the steps and sought assistance from the porter. Here again his mission failed.

"I've only just come on duty, sir. The other man's the one to ask. No, sir, not to-night. It's his evening off. He'll be back in the morning. P'r'aps the boots as brought down the luggage might have heard her give the address."

This worthy, eventually unearthed, explained with a lofty indifference that so many people came and went he couldn't "recklect the lady."

A station omnibus drew up before the door, heavily laden, and the men pocketing their tips turned their attention to the arrivals. Doran had to step aside to avoid the influx of travellers. He crossed the road and began to walk round the gardens by the railings, formulating fresh plans.

Who would be likely to know where she lived? That flat, or room, she had shared with Patty. For he guessed this was her hiding-place. She would fly to her friend in the hour of trouble.

Sir Abel? No. He remembered his words when the pass-book had changed hands. He felt in the midst of his misery a faint sensation of relief. Clotilde? His eyes brightened. Surely some member of her staff would know Isoël's address. Then a new scruple seized him. Would she resent his making inquiries? He remembered Mrs. Serocold and his own earlier visit there. How, he wondered, had Isoël guessed that he had paid that lady's bills? A thought followed, stabbing him.

"She knew — and yet she trusted me!"

"Taxi, sir?" A hoarse voice close to his ear made him jump.

He glanced up and saw he had come to the border of a cab-stand. It evoked a new train of ideas.

"No, not at present," he answered slowly. "I suppose when they want any taxis, they whistle across from the *Russell?*"

"Yessir." The man stared.

"Well, look here," said Doran. "I ought to have met a lady there an hour ago, but I was detained and they've made some muddle about her message, so I don't know exactly where she's gone. If you could give me any clue I'd make it well worth your while."

He drew out a pound note and, holding it in his hand, proceeded to describe the girl, her dress and general appearance.

"She left the hotel in a taxi with luggage about six o'clock. I suppose you're not the man who drove her?"

"No, sir, it weren't me." The brawny driver looked regretful, his eyes fixed on Doran's hand. "I'm just back from a long fare, Fulham way, and I stopped to get my tea as I was coming 'ome. But some of the rest might know. *Sam!*" He called to the next cab. "'Ave yer taken a lidy from the *Russell* anywhere since five?"

He had. Doran's heart quickened.

"What were she like?" asked his friend.

"Middlin' young and tall," said "Sam," suspending his polishing operations, a piece of dirty cotton waste grasped in his raised hand. "Told me I was to 'urry up and when I'd fair busted me tyres getting 'er to Waterloo, gave me tuppence and 'er blessing!" He spat out his disgust. Then added aggressively, as if this explained the whole matter. "Dark 'air and a 'ook nose."

"That's no good," said Doran, vexed.

They moved on down the rank, his companion questioning the drivers, eager to earn his reward. Twice Doran's hopes were raised only to fall to earth again. His genial friend became despondent.

"She might 'ave taken a outside taxi as drove up to the door with a fare. Saves 'em the trouble o' whistling, yer see — war-economy o' breath! There's two more on us in this stand but they're out jist now. If yer leaves yer number, sir, we've got a telephone attached. I could ring yer up, later on."

Doran hesitated, his mind turning again to Clotilde. He could ring her up, too, he thought. No need to go there in person.

The driver suddenly gave a sharp exclamation of joy:

"'Ere's one of 'em!" A rickety car painted green was curving round into position at the end of the paved space, steered by a red-haired man with a truculent expression.

"Hi, Ginger!" he shouted to him, hastening down in his direction, Doran close upon his heels. "This 'ere gent wants to find a missing lidy as took a cab from 'ereabouts an hour ago. Maybe a fare of yours?" He described Isoël with gusto. "Yellow-'aired and thin and pile — went from the *Russell* with 'er luggage."

Ginger scowled. "What if she did?" Indifferent, he scrambled down, lifted the bonnet and dived in, to curse his engine volubly.

Doran's friend shrugged his shoulders.

"That's 'im all over! Irish, yer see, sir, a 'Ome Ruler, an' never 'appy without his grumble. 'Ere, Ginger!" He advanced. "Come out o' that. The gen'leman's w'iting. Yer won't lose by bein' civil." The fiery head came up with a jerk, its owner's blue mistrustful eyes on Doran. His mate tipped him a wink. "Best tell where yer took 'er."

Ginger looked from one to the other as though he suspected some trap. Doran had recourse again to the usual method of persuasion.

The Irishman smiled slowly and passed a hand across his mouth.

"A young lady, is it, sorr?" He spoke with a rusty brogue. "An' dressed in grey with a dancin' step — an' free with her money, bless her sowl!"

"I should say so," Doran smiled. The change in the man was so amusing.

"Sure an' I took her to a street by Euston and lift her there at number foive — I forget the name, but I'd find it agin aisily. An' carried up her box, I did — which isn't me way with ivry wan!"

"Can you drive me there now?" asked Doran, mastering his rising excitement.

Ginger glanced at his fellow-driver.

"I could. Though it's agin the rules. Ye'd be betther takin' the first on the rank."

"That's all square," the other assured him.

Doran thanked the peacemaker.

"Here you are!" The note changed hands. "I'm much obliged for all your trouble." Then he paused, aware that he took the matter a little too much for granted. "You're sure you've made no mistake?" His shining eyes searched Ginger's face. "A tall young lady, very slender, dressed in grey with a blue hat? Fair hair and dark eyes?"

"The same." Ginger gave a chuckle. "Purty as a spring mornin'!"

Doran waited for no more. He was in the taxi with a bound, indifferent to the broad smile on the first driver's face.

That worthy saw him off.

"Thank ye, sir," and added, grinning, "'Ere's luck, Captin'," as the taxi slewed round into the road.

Doran lost all sense of direction when they left the huge square. His thoughts flew ahead of the engines! Once he blinked and gazed out as they crossed a busy thoroughfare and dived again into mean streets, crowded round a terminus. The shunting of a distant train reminded him of the girl's words when she described her midnight vigils, watching the sparks in the smoke.

"This must be right," he said to himself. "But what an awful place to live in!"

They drew up at last before a row of houses larger than those which they faced and retaining an air of faded grandeur beneath the time-worn, flaking stucco.

On the opposite side some ragged urchins were playing about in the gutter and a hawker with a low cart piled with bananas was crying hoarsely the excellence of his wares.

Doran felt a sharp misgiving as he got out and glanced at the number.

"You'd better wait," he said to the man. "I'm not sure that this is the place."

He rang the bell. No one answered. Then he saw that the door was ajar. He pushed it wider and peered in at a hall with dirty distempered walls and a steep

flight of stone stairs marked by innumerable scuffling feet.

Could Isoël live here? It seemed incredible to him.

A door opened on his left and a woman in curling-pins looked out, a wailing infant in her arms.

Doran answered her curious glance.

"I believe a Miss Dark lives here. Can you tell me if I'm right?"

The woman, still young, smiled and nodded, disclosing almost toothless gums.

"It's the first floor, straight up. The door on the right. Yer can't miss it."

He thanked her and moved forward, all his soul crying out with pity and love and amazement. Isoël — his "golden vision" — in this barren tenement of the poor, refusing the luxury he offered at the price of her self-respect.

He realized with cruel force much that had been hidden from him; her sensitive shrinking from confession and the pride which had sent her back to this.

It humbled the man, yet he gloried in her, as he trudged up the dingy stairs. She had risked so much for "a scruple of conscience." Sir Abel Groot had been right. Her courage and faith were greater than his.

He paused when he reached the first landing. Before him was a narrow window with a pane obscured by brown paper where the glass had been recently smashed. The light was dim and he leaned forward to see if a bell stood at the side of the shabby door on his right. He could not find one and hesitated.

The "flat"! Quite suddenly he remembered the scene in the gondola that "blue" day as they drifted along beside sun-drenched Malamocca and Isoël's desperate, smiling evasion when he asked for her town address.

"Oh, my dear! — my *poor* child!" He groaned as the words rose to his lips. Then the knowledge that she was there behind those dusty painted panels sent his pulses beating wildly. He gathered his courage in both hands and knocked twice, holding his breath.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE door was opened by a stranger; a girl with a round freckled face and red hair fluffed out on either side over her ears.

She wore a bright magenta blouse fastened with large round pearls. Her little blue eyes were so fierce as they swept his face that Doran stepped back.

The girl immediately advanced, closing the door firmly behind her.

"Yes?" She stood there, hands to her hips, vixenish and menacing.

"I want to see Miss Dark. I understand that she lives here." He spoke stiffly, surprised by her manner and aware of a sharp disappointment.

"You're quite right." Patty scowled. "But you won't see her — not if I know it! You're Mr. Doran, I suppose?"

He nodded, his mouth grim.

"Then I'd like a few words with you. But not in there —" She jerked her shoulder aggressively towards the door. "You've nearly killed her, as it is! And if you'd any decency you'd leave her alone just now."

Doran could have boxed her ears.

"I suppose you're Patty," he said drily.

"Not to you," she flashed back. "I'm Miss Stephens, if you please."

"I apologize." Doran smiled. Her sudden dignity amused him. He recognized, too, that it would be wise to mollify this fiery champion. "You see," he explained, "I've always heard my fiancée speak of you as 'Patty.' I know what a friend you've been to her."

But Patty saw through his manœuvre.

"You don't get round me that way! Besides she's not your fiancée — not since you threw her over."

"I didn't!" Doran's voice was hot. He pulled himself in hand again but the rather boyish repudiation had held a certain ring of truth. It impressed the girl watching him. She much preferred this open warfare.

"Well, we can't discuss it here and have the neighbours gossiping. There's a room to let across the passage. If you'll come in there I'll speak to you. But I'm not going to have Isoël worried."

Doran, masking his impatience, accepted her proposition. She led the way and he followed, into a dirty deserted apartment, with a litter of paper and other rubbish, including a broken discarded chair leaning up against the wall, crippled by the loss of a leg.

The fogged windows were tightly closed, the air indescribably foul, and Doran choked as he tried to breathe it. Even Patty gave a sniff.

"Do you mind if I open this?" His hand was already on the catch.

"You can try to. I expect it's stuck." Patty's blue eyes twinkled. For Doran was using all his strength. The window would not give an inch. "No go!" The girl giggled, pleased at his discomfiture.

But she did not know the man she dealt with. Doran was not in the mood to yield. He glanced behind him and picked up the chair.

"Stand back!" He warned her, smiling. The next moment with a crash the lowest pane had disappeared. "That's better!" He drew in a breath of the air that poured through the jagged opening as though the faint room sucked it in.

"My! You'll catch it," Patty scolded.

He laughed at her. The incident had relieved him physically.

"It's an 'accident.' These things will happen! I'll make it right. Don't worry!" He drew out his handkerchief from inside his cuff and wiped his fingers.

The thought flashed through Patty's mind that here was a man who found his way over most obstacles. She felt a sneaking respect for him.

"Now then, Miss Stephens." He stood facing her, serious once more, his dark brows in a straight ridge over his keen compelling eyes, very tall in his khaki, looking down upon her freckles. "I'm going to ask you a straight question. Do you think that Miss Dark would be happier *with* me — or *without* me?"

It was unexpected. Patty stared.

"I can't say — off-hand. Depends on the kind of man you are."

"Is she happy now?" Doran persisted.

"She's broken-hearted," said Patty fiercely.

A quiver passed across his face. The girl noticed it and wondered.

"Then will you help me to put things right?"

"How?" She was still on the defensive.

"Get her to marry me to-morrow."

Patty gasped.

"You *mean* that?" Her voice rose, shrill with excitement. She moved a pace nearer him. "On your word?"

"On my honour," said Doran.

There came a dramatic little pause.

"And you're a V.C. too." Patty was speaking her thoughts aloud.

Doran smiled. He understood that she was weighing him in the balance as a soldier and a gentleman.

"What do you think I came here for?" He felt a sudden liking for this candid friend of Isoël's. He took her into his confidence. "I'll own I've made a mess of things." His voice was gloomy as he spoke. "I suppose you know all about it?"

Patty shook her red mop.

"That's just it," she almost wailed. "She won't explain! Not a word. I've never known her like this before! Only says it's all over. I thought you'd given her the go-by. She just sits there in despair, staring out through the window. She doesn't cry. It's simply awful! I can't bear it." Her voice broke. "I could have murdered you just now when you came to the door all la-di-da and sort of offered yer visiting-card!" She was working up into anger again. "You'd no business to treat her like this — as good a girl as ever breathed! Too good for a man of your class. I told her as much — so *there!*"

Doran gave a rueful smile.

"I daresay you're right. But I'd like you to know she broke it off of her own accord. Because — she thought —" He was stammering now — "that I'd lost

my belief in her. The worst of it is she spoke the truth. I couldn't understand the part Sir Abel Groot had played in her life."

"Groot!" cried Patty. She brought out the name with a venom that startled Doran. "Nasty old beast! I always said that he wasn't up to no good. Not that Isoël," she added loyally, on the defensive, "would ever *look* at a man like him —"

"I know." Doran interrupted.

Patty became rather thoughtful.

"So that was the trouble." She bit her lip. "What made you change your mind?"

"She asked me to go and see him. She refused to tell me a word herself." Patty was watching him, lynx-eyed. Her face changed at this remark. "So I went." Doran drew himself up. "It was about that fifty pounds. He told me that it was not a present, but a reward, which she had earned."

"And you believed him?"

He nodded his head.

"Of course. You see, it was Isoël." He gulped down a lump that rose in his throat. "I was a fool ever to doubt her. But she'd kept so many things back and when she refused to explain this, I felt in despair. Can you understand?"

Patty impulsively held out her hand.

"Rather!" She was won.

Doran gripped the stumpy fingers with their pointed nails until he hurt her; but Patty bore the pain unflinching.

Then she began to plead for her friend.

"It's not her fault — she's like that — awfully proud and touchy, you know. That mother of hers was a fool. Brought her up like a fine lady, always boasting of her father. A pretty father!" Patty scoffed. "Drank like a fish and deserted them. Well, she knows *now* what he was! I think she's not got over the shock. Enough to make her downright ill, to see him killed under her eyes."

"What?" Doran stared, amazed.

Patty gasped.

"Now I've done it! I thought you knew?" She

searched his face anxiously. "I'd best tell you. It's *my* fault if she kept it back. We decided it was her father's secret. You see, she felt it awfully."

She proceeded to enlighten him. Doran looked horrified.

"My poor little girl! That too."

"You don't mind?" asked Patty bluntly. "I mean about his being a waiter."

"Good Lord, no! I remember the man. You could tell he'd seen better days. Poor chap! Though I'm glad he's gone. It's best so — for Isoël."

Patty drew a sigh of relief.

Doran smiled at her expression.

"I don't care a damn," he confided, "about anything except this. I want to see her, and see her *now*. May I?"

Patty beamed at him.

"Go and make it up," she cried. "I'll stay here. You know the way?" But Doran already had reached the door. Patty was after him like a shot. "I say, one minute! Don't let her know about her father? That I'd told you. She mightn't like it."

"All right. It's *our* secret."

His smile was so friendly and confidential that Patty giggled and blew him a kiss. Doran grinned as he crossed the landing.

"That's a good girl," he said to himself.

Then, his heart in his mouth, he tapped again at Isoël's door. There was no answer. He paused and listened.

"Go in," breathed Patty across the intervening space, her face as anxious as his own.

He turned the handle noiselessly and stood, at last, upon the threshold.

Isoël sat by the open window, her hands folded in her lap. He could see her profile clearly outlined against the shadows of the night deeper than those in the squalid street, for the railway cutting lay beyond with its hollow void, dark and misty.

She reminded him of a lunette in a far-distant Italian cloister, with one of della Robbia's saints; the pure lumi-

nous white of her face and the blue-grey of the background framed in the arched Georgian window.

"Isoël!"

She did not move. She seemed to be wrapped in lonely dreams. He stole closer, his heart thudding. Then he knelt down at her feet, awed by her mood, fearing to touch her.

"Isoël, will you forgive me?"

He saw the slender hands tighten; her bosom rose and fell quickly but she gave no other sign of his presence save the painful clasp of those fragile fingers.

He stooped and pressed his lips to them.

She drew them away with a sharp cry.

"*No!*"

"Yes," said Doran tensely. "They're mine. I've a right to them."

"And to me?" she cried, a little wildly. "You forget! I belong to Sir Abel Groot."

All the pent-up scorn and despair of her broken hopes lay in the speech. She turned her sombre gaze on him and met his own rebelliously.

But Doran's will was the stronger. Now, when she tried to lower her eyes they were held by his. In vain she sought to escape from the passionate love and pity that welled up in their grey depths. They seemed to be drawing her down to him. Slowly her anger ebbed away.

Through a mist she heard his longing voice.

"Come to me! I love you so."

She gave a little breathless sob.

"But you don't trust me."

"I do, I do!" His arms strained up but left her free. "My darling, can't you understand? You're brave—won't you be merciful? For God's sake, look at me!" For her heavy lids had fallen now. "Ah!"—as shyly she obeyed him—"I swear to you, as I live, I've but one thought in the world: that I love you and honour you and long for you as my wife."

She put out a timid hand and touched his cheek with her finger-tips, the furtive caress of a child. It was done almost unconsciously. She seemed still to be lost in dreams.

"I wonder . . ."

She caught a glimpse over him of the great mirror, like a wraith of long past magnificence, with its tarnished frame and broken cherub. In it she saw the kneeling form of her fairy prince with his straight young limbs, broad shoulders and flung back head. It seemed like a dream within a dream.

The house shook as a train roared past, speeding outward to the sea, leaving behind it a trail of smoke stung by sparks that glowed and vanished. Out, out, on the road of adventure!

But here in this bare and shabby room, with its blackened ceiling and iron beds stood Romance, a golden figure, calling to her that the "best in life" for which she had played so heedlessly, lay at her feet, achieved through pain, a love that was based on Truth and Honour.

Everything else faded before it, this Vision Splendid, hers at last.

"Francis, *Francis!*" The spell snapped.

Like a tired child she slipped down into the arms that closed about her.

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